

Acc. No. 30553
26-2

WHO AM I ?

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi

1879-1950





FOREWORD

Sri Ramana Maharshi, the Sage of Arunachala, reverentially called "Bhagavan" by legions of followers and admirers, is one of India's most cherished spiritual icons whose life and teachings continue to inspire people worldwide. Even as he spent his days in the shade of the Arunachala hill in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, mostly in meditative silence while he ensured his ashram was bustling with spiritual and humanitarian activity, he became a widely celebrated legend in his lifetime.

What was inspiring about Sri Ramana was that his teachings steered sharply away from dogma or the invocation of religious orthodoxy and were firmly grounded in very simple principles that forced the seeker to turn his or her concentration relentlessly inwards. He insisted that rather than relying only on scriptural learning, the seeker should practise rigorous Self-enquiry as a personal journey towards Self-realisation. Reflecting a truly mystical approach to spirituality, Sri Ramana's own "awakening" transformational experience happened when he was only 16. A sudden fear of death which he dramatised intentionally by imitating a corpse in rigor mortis to "give greater reality to the enquiry" led him to discover that while "this body dies...the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death".

This laid the foundation of Ramana Maharshi's teachings that primarily stressed *Vichara* or Self-enquiry such as "Who am I?", expressed in Tamil as "Naan Yaar?" which was an appealing route in that it transcended all denominations of religion, caste, gender or region, allowing the individual to access his or her true freedom of Self. Sri Ramana, by universalising his teachings and opening the doors of his ashram to all seekers, represented the true inclusivist essence of Hinduism which does not discriminate amongst those longing for spiritual transformation or does not privilege

specific religious or caste traditions to exclude people from its ambit.

The Hindu Group is proud to present this specially curated publication on Sri Ramana Maharshi on his 70th death anniversary. The content, meticulously researched and imaginatively curated by T.S. Subramanian, contains both historical narrative and reverential tributes from the Maharshi's disciples, some of whom knew Sri Ramana personally. There are also vivid evocations of the Maharshi's beloved places of residence, the sacred Arunachala hill and the majestic Arunachaleswarar temple, both of deep religious significance held in high esteem by millions of devotees and which have made Tiruvannamalai a major destination for spiritual tourism.

The Hindu is privileged to have a long historic and deep connection with Sri Ramana Maharshi, as testified by vivid reportage and indeed reverential commentary in the columns of the newspaper during his lifetime. Included in this volume are the *The Hindu's* loving tributes to the great sage of Arunachala, which renders our group's connection with Sri Ramana Maharshi a unique bond. *The Hindu's* editorial of April 17, 1950, three days after the Maharshi's passing, noted: "The age of the atom bomb will also go down as the age of the Mahatma and the Maharshi. If humanity is not to be submerged in the chaos of its own making, it must give more heed to its sages and seers".

A true mystic who was clear that spiritual awakening was not fettered by religion, caste, class or gender, Ramana Maharshi is one of India's spiritual leaders with a truly universal appeal. It is indeed our privilege to bring to the reading public this special volume on the great seer and readers are bound to find this collection memorable and inspiring.

Malini Parthasarathy
Co-Chair, *The Hindu Group* & Director,
Editorial Strategy, *The Hindu*

3653

Contents



04 Call of the Divine

12 Leaving the world behind

20 Journey into
Self-realisation

28 A sadhu's life

34 Towards the Infinite

40 Milestones in Bhagavan's
life

42 Who Am I?

48 Forty verses on Reality -
Ulladu Narpadu

50 An aura of spirituality

54 Preserving a holy legacy

58 The meteor and
mahanirvana

60 Education amidst
spirituality

62 "I felt like a king"

64 Arunachala, the divine hill

68 The girivalam: prayer to
the sacred hill

74 Bhagavan's many hidden
facets

78 The mysterious book
bundle

80 When all life is to be
loved

84 "Bhagavan was not his
body at all"

90 Holding together
India's spiritual fabric

96 "A place where all
are equal"

102 From Assam to
Arunachala

106 The Maharshi and
the scope for the aspirant

108 'BIT' film - a
photographic journey

112 A blessed friendship

114 The story of the
Ramanasramam idli

116 Did Bhagavan meet
Subramania Bharathi?

118 An endearing
relationship

120 At the feet of the
Bhagavan

122 The mystic saint who
was a Ramana devotee

124 Beyond life,
thoughts, mind and body

126 Our rishis' marga is
the heart, not the mind

128 In search of what is True

130 The basis of Truth is 'I am'

132 From all walks of life

134 Preserving a rich cultural and spiritual heritage

138 True devotion and selfless service

142 They came, and stayed on

146 In tune with the Infinite

150 Sri Ramana Rishi passes away

152 Sri Ramana Maharshi

154 The esoteric significance of darshan at the Annamalaiyar temple in Tiruvannamalai

164 Temple murals: a slice of history

166 Temple maintenance: endowments and measures

04 

Call of the Divine

The first of the series that tells the life story of Sri Ramana Maharshi

68 

The girivalam: prayer to the sacred hill

Arunachala, the hill, is considered the living embodiment of the sacred

84 

"Bhagavan was not his body at all"

Ilaiyaraaja, music composer and devotee, speaks of the Maharshi

118 

An endearing relationship

Mahan Seshadri Swamy and his relationship with the Bhagavan

152 

Sri Ramana Maharshi

From the rich archives of *The Hindu*, an editorial from the past

164 

Temple murals: a slice of history

The temple offers us glimpses of history through its surviving murals

Content Generation:
T.S. Subramanian

Copy Editing:
Sandhya Sridhar

Design: L. Balamurugan

Production support:
D. Murugan & Team

Credits: Photos:
Sri Ramanasramam,
Tiruvannamalai

Photographers:
S.R. Raghunathan,
C. Venkatachalapathy,
and G. Moorthy

Archival support:
A. Sankaran, K. R. Naresh Kumar,
S. K. Subramanya and
K. Arunkumar

Cover: Sri Ramana Maharshi in 1946. When Bhagavan asked photographer G.G. Welling, "Is there enough light?" for this picture, Welling reparteed, "Bhagavan, you are the light!" Photo: Sri Ramanasramam

Back cover: The 217-foot tall *rajagopura* in the Arunachaleswarar temple, Tiruvannamalai, built by emperor Krishnadevaraya in 1516 CE. G.G. Welling took this picture in 1946. Photo: Sri Ramanasramam

Poster 1 (inside): A serene-looking Bhagavan reclining on his couch in Sri Ramanasramam. Photo: Sri Ramanasramam

Poster 2 (inside): A schematic diagram of the shrines in eight directions, *mantapas*, temples. Courtesy: Sri Ramanasramam

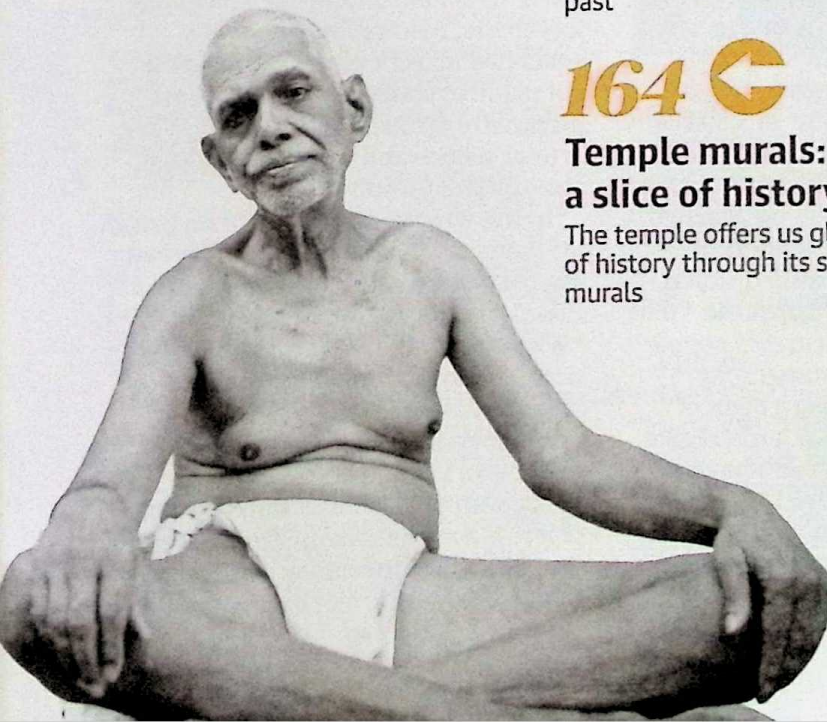
The Hindu's archival materials have been reproduced in their original form.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of THG Publishing (P) Ltd.

Published by N. Ravi at Kasturi Buildings, 859 and 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, and Printed by K Balaji, Sri Kals Graphics Pvt Ltd., A27, SIDCO Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai - 600 032, on behalf of THG Publishing Private Limited Chennai - 600 002.

Editor: Suresh Nambath

All rights reserved
Copyright © THG Publishing Private Ltd., 2020



WHO AM I?



LIFE STORY-I

Call of the Divine

The story of how sixteen-year-old Venkataraman discovered his spiritual calling

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

F

rom below, it looked like an easy climb. On either side of the slope were tenements with motorbikes, scooters and autorickshaws parked on the "street" called Perumal Gopuram Street, popularly called Pei Gopuram Lane. After a climb of about 150 metres, the street disappears and there are no more tenements. A cobbled pathway presents itself. It had rained hard the previous night and the foliage of the dense jungle on either side of the pathway, wore a washed look. The ascent up the hill proved to be tougher than expected. There were several Indians and foreigners climbing the hill. A runnel with flowing water from the rains crossed our path. Just ahead of it, a man was busy sculpting tiny stone icons of the Sivalingam, Nandi (the bull), Ganesa, or "Om" in Sanskrit etched on the figure of Arunachala hill.

After a climb of about 1.5 km from the foot of the Arunachala hill, we reached our destination. On the boulders on our right are the white-painted words in Tamil and English, "Virupaksha cave". Another legend instructs people to "Keep silence". No photography is allowed. After traversing a flight of concrete steps that ends at a metal gate, a board announces, "Virupaksha cave. Sri Ramana Maharshi stayed here from 1899 to 1916". The Virupaksha cave is a protected site under the Archaeological Survey India (ASI). A small board says,

"Under the management and control of Sri Ramanasramam".

Virupaksha cave

On the façade of the built-up entrance to the Virupaksha cave is inscribed "Om" in Sanskrit. The cave is naturally-formed in the shape of "Om". It is actually a cavern. In front of this cavern is a built-up hall. It is called the Virupaksha cave because Virupaksha Deva, a saint from Karnataka, had lived here in the 16th century CE and attained *mukti* here. A Sivalingam marks the spot where Virupaksha Deva attained *mukti*. The Sivalingam is made of *vibhuti* (sacred ash) and a clean, white cloth is wrapped around it. Inside the cave are several men and women including foreigners, meditating. There is a small hall in front of the cave, with a cot made of concrete. On the cot are pictures of Sri Ramana Maharshi. There is total silence and a deeply, spiritual atmosphere prevails.

In the 70-year life history of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, the enlightened sage who lived in Tiruvannamalai and raised the spiritually seminal question "Who am I?", the Virupaksha cave occupies an outstanding place for several reasons.

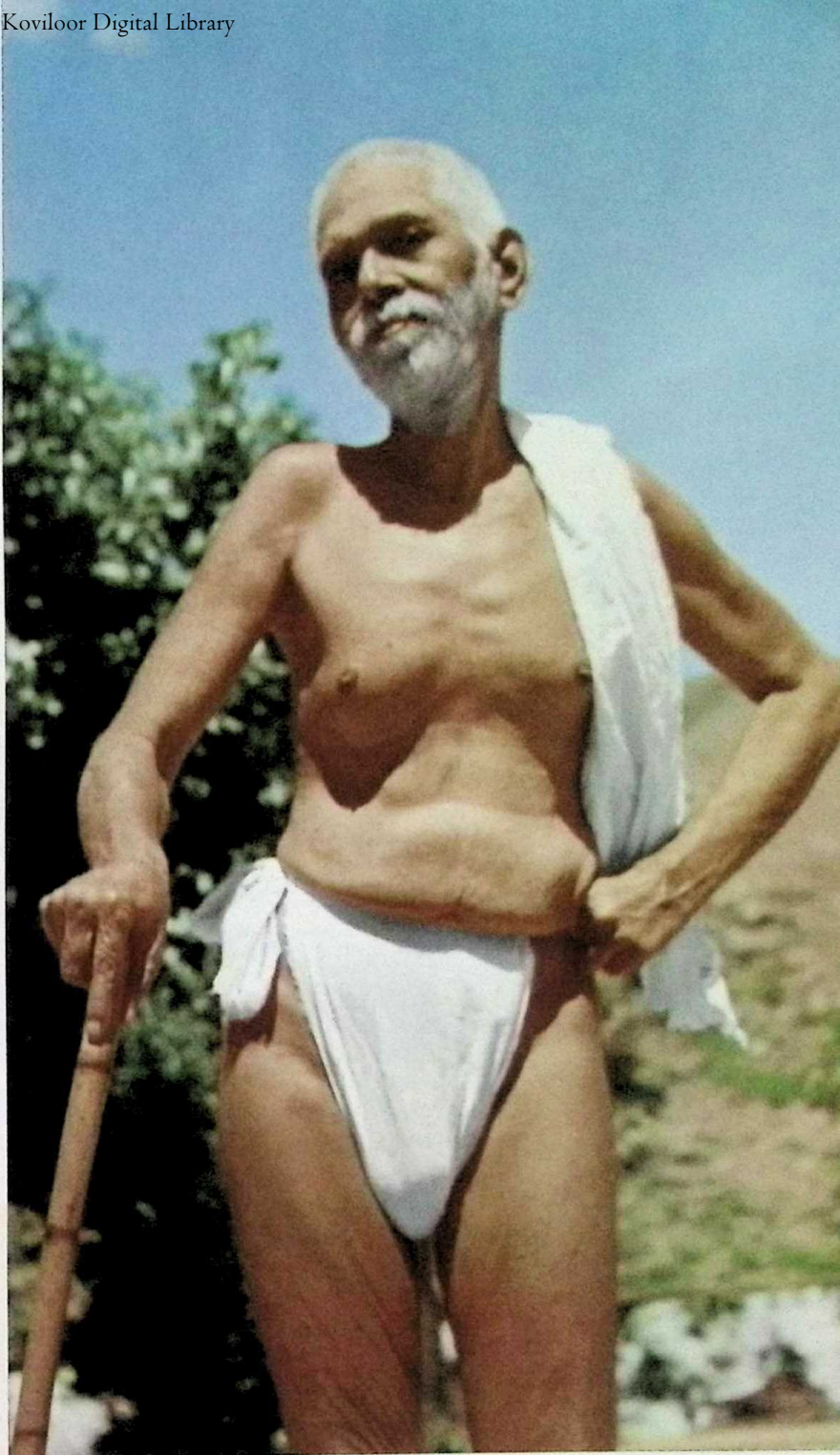
V. Ganesan, 83-year-old grand-nephew of the Maharshi, says, "Bhagavan's life in all its simplicity and purity is a movement in Silence - the One Reality, transcending all duality. It offers the seeker an insight into the

spontaneous living of a sage in whom the idea of separate identity or individual actor has died." (From Preface to First Edition, *Bhagavan Sri Ramana, A Pictorial Biography*, 1981, published by Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai.)

Ganesan asks in another book of his, "...What was the purpose of Bhagavan Arunachala Raman's advent on the earth? In his hymn, "Necklace of Nine Gems", Bhagavan reveals it: "Arunachala commanded me to make known his true state of Awareness all over the world as the Self in each one's Heart, and thereby destroy the false identity that one is the body." (From *Ramana Periya Puranam, Inner Journey of 75 Old Devotees* by V. Ganesan, Sri Ramanasramam.)

K.V. Subrahmonyan, who is 87-years-old and has deeply immersed himself in Sri Ramana Maharshi's teachings, says, "Bhagavan was the most silent among the gurus and the most non-dual. In Ramana, there is no duality." In other words, Ramana was an Advaitin non-pareil. Subrahmonyan, widely read and erudite on a variety of subjects, says, "When I came here, I found that a single smile of Bhagavan tells us volumes of Vedanta on Reality." He recalls an incident when Guy Hague, an American engineer, went for a walk with Bhagavan from Sri Ramanasramam at the foot of the hill, to the nearby settlement of Palakothu. It was at Palakothu that Maharshi's most committed devotees lived. Ramana was a few steps ahead when Hague asked him, "How about helping others when you attain *jnana*?" Bhagavan turned back and declared, "When you attain *jnana*, there are no others."

The Virupaksha cave was where Ramana first proclaimed the answer to the question "Who am I?" or "Nan Yar?" in Tamil, which is at the very core of his teachings. The introduction to the publication, *Who am I?* (published by Sri Ramanasramam), says, "'Who am I?' is the title given to a set of questions and answers bearing on Self-enquiry." The questions were put to Ramana by M. Sivaprakasam Pillai, a graduate in philosophy and a Revenue Department official, in 1902. Sivaprakasam Pillai sought from Ramana spiritual guidance



and solicited answers to questions related to Self-enquiry. As Bhagavan was observing silence then, he answered the questions in writing. As recollected and recorded by Sivaprakasam Pillai, there were 13 questions and answers given to them by Ramana.

"Who am I?"

The publication *Who am I?* says: "Along with *Vichara Sangraham* (Self-enquiry), *Nan Yar* constitutes the first set of instructions in Master's own words. Both are in prose. Another prose work of Ramana is his translation of Adi Sankara's *Viveka Chudamani*

• COLOUR PICTURE:

This is the only colour photograph of Sri Ramana Maharshi, taken by an unknown devotee, circa 1948 CE.

PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM,
TIRUVANNAMALAI



• BIRTH PLACE:

(Top) The house at Tiruchuzhi where Venkataraman, later known as Sri Ramana Maharshi, was born. (Centre): Sundaram Iyer and Azhagammal, parents of Ramana. - PHOTOS:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM (Bottom): The room in the Tiruchuzhi house where Venkataraman was born.

- PHOTO: G. MOORTHY

from Sanskrit to Tamil. Ramana did the translation while living in the Virupaksha cave. They clearly set forth his central teaching that the direct path to liberation is Self-enquiry."

It was during Ramana's stay in the Virupaksha cave that Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, a man of colossal learning in Sanskrit and Telugu, bestowed the title "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi" on the 28-year-old saint in November 1907. From then on, the world came to address Bhagavan as Sri Ramana Maharshi. Till then, he was known as "Brahmana Swamy" or "Kara Paathira Swamy". The latter in Tamil means "the mendicant who begs for food with his empty hands". A man of extraordinary scholarship, Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, who had mastered the four Vedas and 108 Upanishads, had a great reverence for the Maharshi who, in turn, would respectfully call him "Nayana".

A short distance above the Virupaksha cave is the Skandasramam. The Maharshi stayed there for six years from 1916 to 1922. There is an air of spirituality and overpowering silence at Skandasramam as well. The small garden in front of the ashram and its open forecourt offers a commanding view of the Arunachaleswara temple below, with its *vimana* and nine majestic *gopuras* soaring into the sky.

On the Skandasramam premises, there is a small room on the left where

Bhagavan's mother, Azhagammal, attained liberation in 1922. There is a board at the room's entrance. It says, "The holy room where Sri Bhagavan's mother attained liberation through his touch." The room has two windows. On the rear wall is a photograph of Azhagammal seated on a rock on the hill. There are two lamps burning,

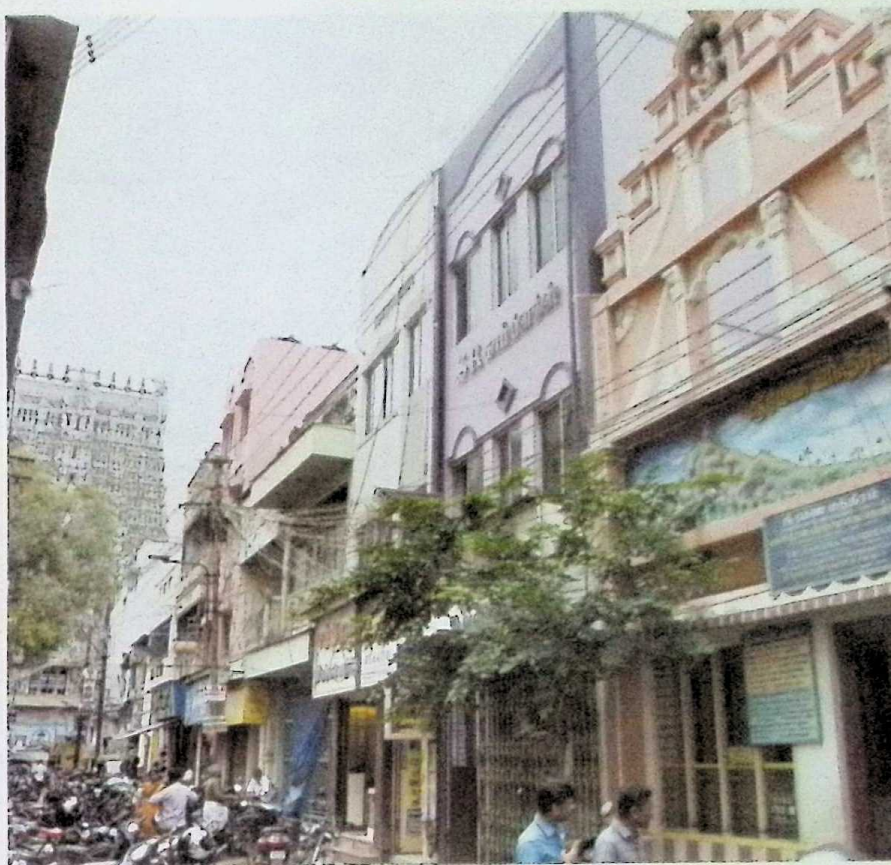


one on either side of Azhagammal's photograph. There is a Ganesa idol on the floor. Adjacent to this room is a hall with long window grilles. There is another hall behind it. Adjacent to the second hall is a tiny antechamber which has a bench. On the bench is a picture of the Maharshi in a reclining position. The antechamber has a window and a coconut tree shoots through the roof. Behind the second hall is a cave. Behind the cave is vertical rock surface. A photograph of the Maharshi is kept on a wooden plank on the cave's bed-rock and a lamp is burning. Many persons including foreigners are in deep meditation in the cave or the hall in front of it.

Skandasramam is equally important in the life history of Ramana. As T.V. Chandramouli, a devotee of Ramana and a senior staff member of Sri Ramanasramam, says, "It was at Skandasramam that Sri Narayana Guru, the great social reformer of Kerala, met Sri Ramana Maharshi in 1917 or so. Sri Narayana Guru composed *Nivriti Panchagam* in Sanskrit, extolling the Bhagavan. It consisted of five stanzas. They conversed in Malayalam and Tamil." When it was time for lunch, Bhagavan invited Narayana Guru to have food with him. They dined together. Later, after Narayana Guru went back to Kerala, he composed *Municharya Panchaga*, praising Ramana. According to Chandramouli, it was during his stay at the Virupaksha cave and Skandasramam, that Bhagavan achieved a splendid command over Telugu, Malayalam and Sanskrit. He could read and write in these languages. He attained an excellent felicity to compose poems in the three languages.

Chandramouli credited Maharshi's mother, Azhagammal, for starting the tradition of serving food to visitors at Skandasramam. Today, Sri Ramanasramam, in its present location at the foot of the hill, serves free breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner to a few hundreds of his devotees every day of the year.

After Venkataraman (the name given to Ramana by his parents) walked out of his home in Madurai on August 29, 1896 at the age of 16 and reached



Tiruvannamalai on September 1, 1896, he never left the sacred Arunachala hill and Tiruvannamalai for the next 54 years. He walked barefoot everywhere. He knew every spur of the hill and its water bodies, giant trees and herbal plants. If there was one attachment that Ramana had, it was for the Arunachala hill.

Dev Gogoi, a committed devotee of Maharshi, notes, "Although Bhagavan never left the hill for 54 continuous years, the world came to him." That included highly learned men and women, princes and paupers, poets and philosophers, simple rural folk, freedom fighters, industrialists, scientists and men with puissant power. He had a big following in the West. Though, as Dev Gogoi noted, Bhagavan never propagated his teachings.

A son is born

"A son, a son!" rang out a voice on December 30, 1879 from the confinement room in the residence of Sundaram Iyer in the village of Tiruchuzhi, about 56 km from Madurai, Tamil Nadu. The day corresponded to

• The house in Madurai, situated near the Meenakshi temple's southern *gopuram*, where Venkataraman lived with his uncle Subbier after his father died in 1892.

- PHOTO: G. MOORTHY

WHO AM I?



■ ELEMENTARY

EDUCATION: (Top)

The Sethupathi Primary School at Tiruchuzhi, where Venkataraman, had his initial education.

(Bottom, right):

The upstairs room in the house at Madurai where Venkataraman had his Death Experience in July 1896, which transformed him into a realised soul.

— PHOTOS: G. MOORTHY

day 16th of the Tamil month of Margazhi in the year called *Pramadi*. It was Arudra Darshan day, which is a sacred day for Hindus because Siva manifested himself as Nataraja to them then. On that day, a son was born to Sundaram Iyer and his wife, Azhagammal. Sundaram Iyer had built up a practice as a pleader at Tiruchuzhi. The couple named their new-born child Venkataraman. He was their second son. Their eldest son, Nagaswami, was two years older to Venkataraman. The couple had a third son whom they named Nagasundaram. Their fourth child was Alamelu, a daughter.

Venkataraman first attended the local primary school at Tiruchuzhi. When he was eleven, he was sent to attend a school at Dindigul where Nelliappa Iyer, a brother of Sundaram Iyer, was living. Sundaram Iyer died in 1892 when Venkataraman was 12. With the breadwinner dead, the family fell on bad days. The children went to live with Subbier, another brother of Sundaram Iyer, at Madurai. Subbier's residence was just a stone's throw from the majestic southern *gopura* of the famed Meenakshi temple. At Madurai,

Venkataraman first attended Scott's Middle School and later the American Mission High School. Venkataraman was not a studious pupil. He was a strong lad and more interested in sports including football. He was an agile swimmer. He slumbered often for several hours. He had some spiritual bent of mind and visited the nearby Meenakshi temple and the Murugan temple at Tirupparankundram and prayed there.

Venkataraman turned 16. A swamiji who was their neighbour, gave Subbier a book titled, *Periya Puranam*, which deals with the 63 Saivite saints' selfless devotion to Lord Siva. Venkataraman became absorbed in the book. As he said later, "...I looked into it first out of curiosity, and then becoming interested, read the whole book. It made a great impression on me." He was deeply moved by the 63 Saivite saints' total devotion to Siva, who tested them on their piety towards Him and then redeemed them.

In November 1895, he met an elderly relative at home. Venkataraman asked him where he was coming from. The elderly relative replied, "From Arunachala." With child-like innocence, Venkataraman asked him, "What? Arunachala? Where is it?" The





relative explained that Arunachala is a sacred hill in Tiruvannamalai. The name “Arunachala” touched a spiritual chord in the lad. After he had immersed himself in the *Periya Puranam* and heard about Arunachala, a current of awareness began to awaken in him

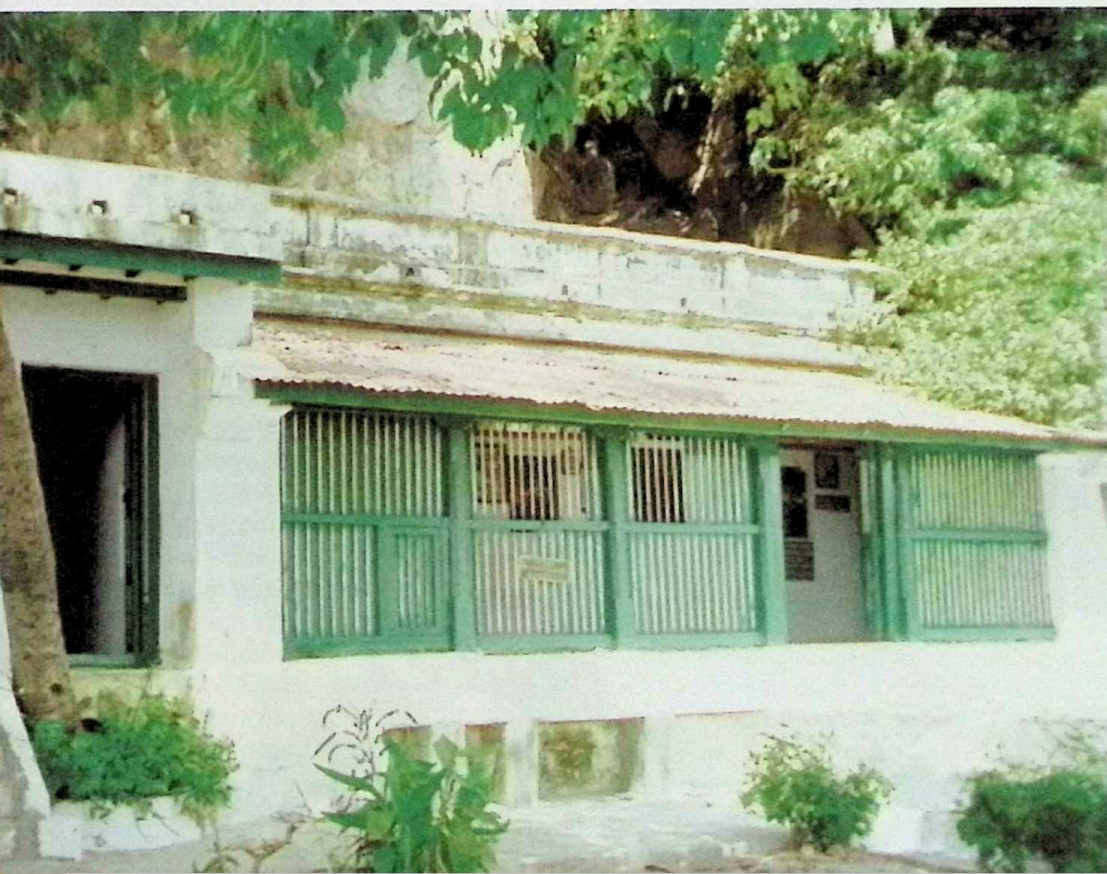
during his visits to the Meenakshi temple. About this, Bhagavan said later, “At first I thought it was some kind of fever. But I decided, if so, it is a pleasant fever, so let it say.”

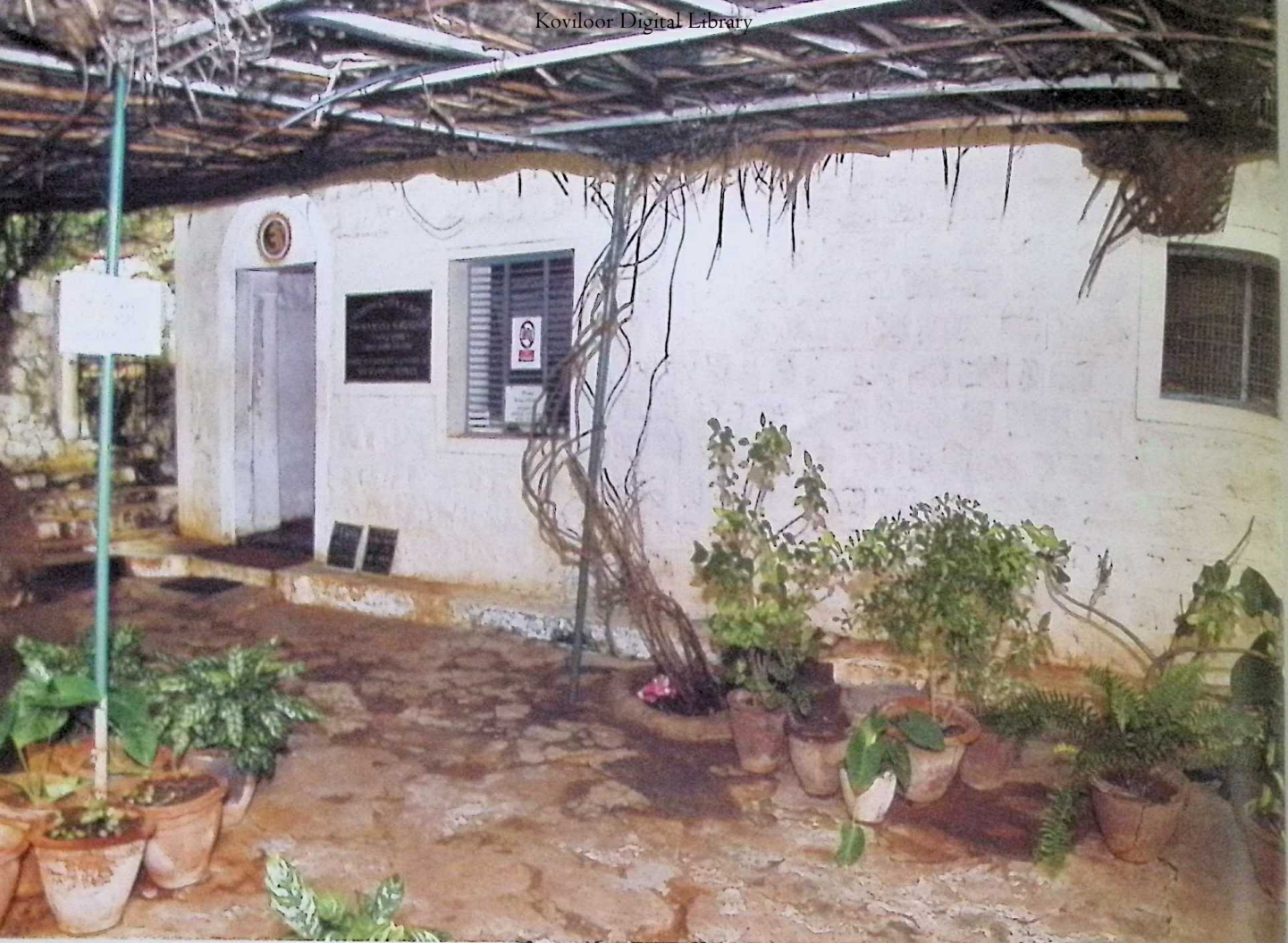
It was July 1896. When Venkataraman was in the upstairs room of his uncle’s

• **SIVA TEMPLE: (Top)** The Bhuminathar temple at Tiruchuzhi, with its *gopura* and the sacred tank brimming with water, which Venkataraman would visit in his childhood.

- PHOTO: G. MOORTHY
(Bottom): Selfless devotee: On the Arunachala hill is Skandasramam, singlehandedly built by Kandaswami, Ramana’s devotee, where Ramana lived from 1916 to 1922. At extreme left is the room where Ramana’s mother, Azhagammal, attained *mukti* in 1922.

- PHOTO: ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA (ASI)





• HISTORIC EVENTS: (Top)

The Virupaksha cave on the Arunachala hill, where Ramana Maharshi lived from 1899 to 1916 and many historic events in his life took place there.

- PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

(Bottom): The front, built-up hall in the Virupaksha cave with its big, overhanging rock. Ramana would sit or lie down on the cement concrete bench.

- PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM



house, a sudden fear of death seized him. At first, he was afraid of it. Later, he felt ecstatic about it.

"The climax occurred... with no quest, no striving, no conscious preparation, when he had a sudden and inexplicable fear of death. The experience of death transformed a school boy into a sage in a single act, which was spontaneous, swift, complete and absolutely permanent." (From *Bhagavan Sri Ramana, A Pictorial Biography*, published by Sri Ramanasramam.)

Death experienced

Sri Ramana Maharshi has described his death experience: "It was about six weeks before I left Madurai for good, that the great change in my life took place. It was quite sudden. I was sitting alone in a room on the first floor of my uncle's house. I seldom had any sickness, and on that day, there was nothing wrong with my health, but a sudden violent fear of death overtook me. There was nothing in my state of health to account for it, and I did not try to account for it or try to find out whether there was any reason for the fear. I just felt "I am going to die" and began thinking what to do about it. It did not occur to me to consult a doctor or my elders or friends. I felt I had to solve the problem myself, there and then." (*Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge*, Arthur Osborne, published by Sri Ramanasramam.)

Venkataraman dramatised the occurrence of death. Ramana recalled later: "... I lay with my limbs stretched out as though rigor mortis had set in, and imitated a corpse so as to give a greater reality to the enquiry. I held my breath and kept my mouth tightly

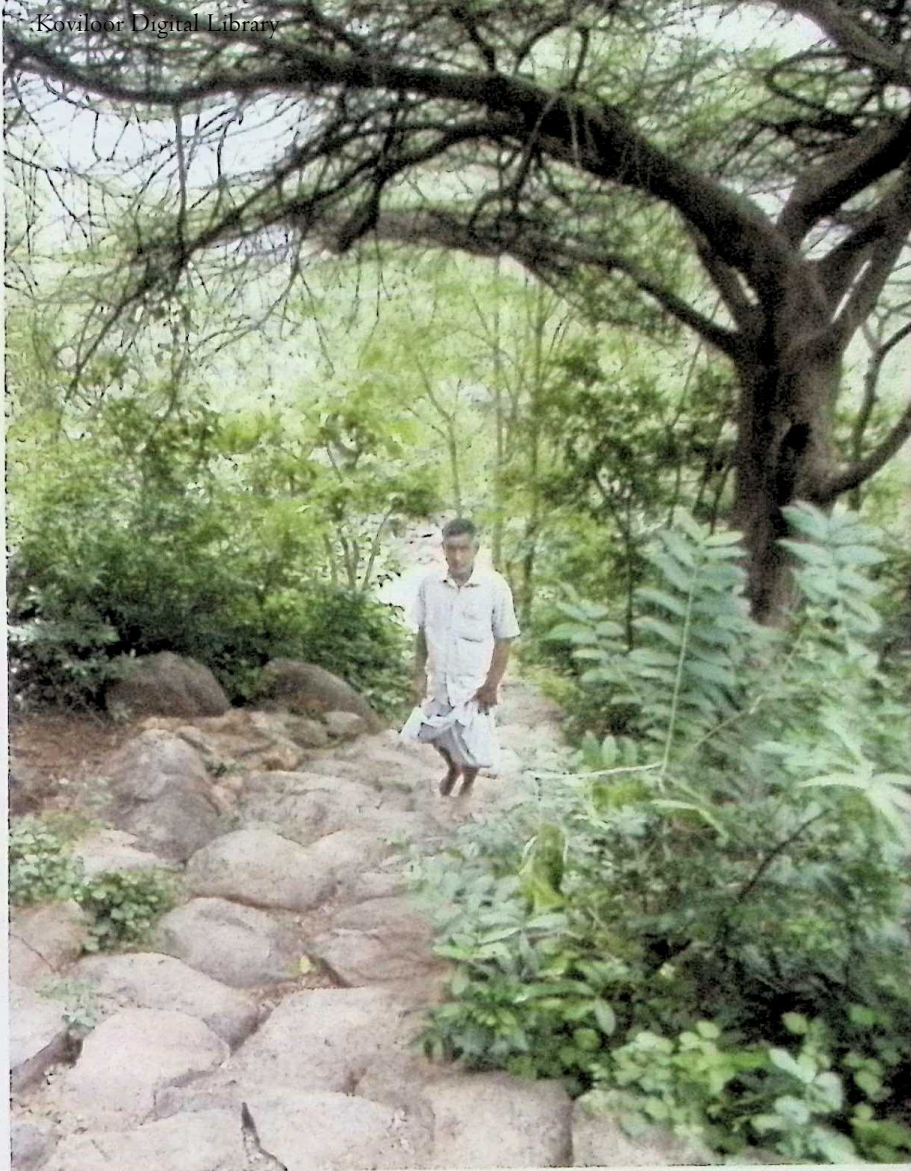
closed so that no sound could escape, so that neither the word "I" nor any other could be uttered. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'This body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground, and there, burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body, am 'I' dead? Is the body 'I'? It is silent and inert, but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of 'I' within me, apart from it. So 'I' am the Spirit transcending the body. This body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit.'"

As Dev Gogoi says, "This question, *Nan yaar* [Who am I?] occurred to him spontaneously. It occurred in a flash. It arose in him without warning. The flash completely destroyed Venkataraman. It is the Living Reality of Bhagavan."

K.S. Kannan, Office Manager, Sri Ramanasramam, says: "The experience lasted about 20 minutes. First, he was afraid of the experience. Later, he was in a state of bliss. He never told his mother, brothers or uncle about the experience. He realised that death can only overwhelm the body but cannot touch the Spirit. Once and for all, his fear of death was gone."

Before his death experience, Venkataraman was an active lad, playing football, competing with other lads in swimming in the Mariamman temple tank at Madurai and willingly helping his aunt in her chores. His aunt had a soft corner for him and believed that he had "a golden hand", the Midas touch.

After the death experience, a sea-change came over Venkataraman. He became uninterested in life around. He lost his passion for sports. Earlier, if food was not served warm for him, he would throw a tantrum. He no longer did that. He did not feel like going out, but forever wanted to enquire into the Self. The question "Who am I?" haunted him. His attention in class waned. He would often be seen at home with his eyes closed and in meditation.



★ **THE PATHWAY: (Top)**

T. V. Chandramouli on the cobbled pathway, with dense jungle on either side, which leads to the Virupaksha cave and the Skandasramam, where Ramana Maharshi lived.

- PHOTO:

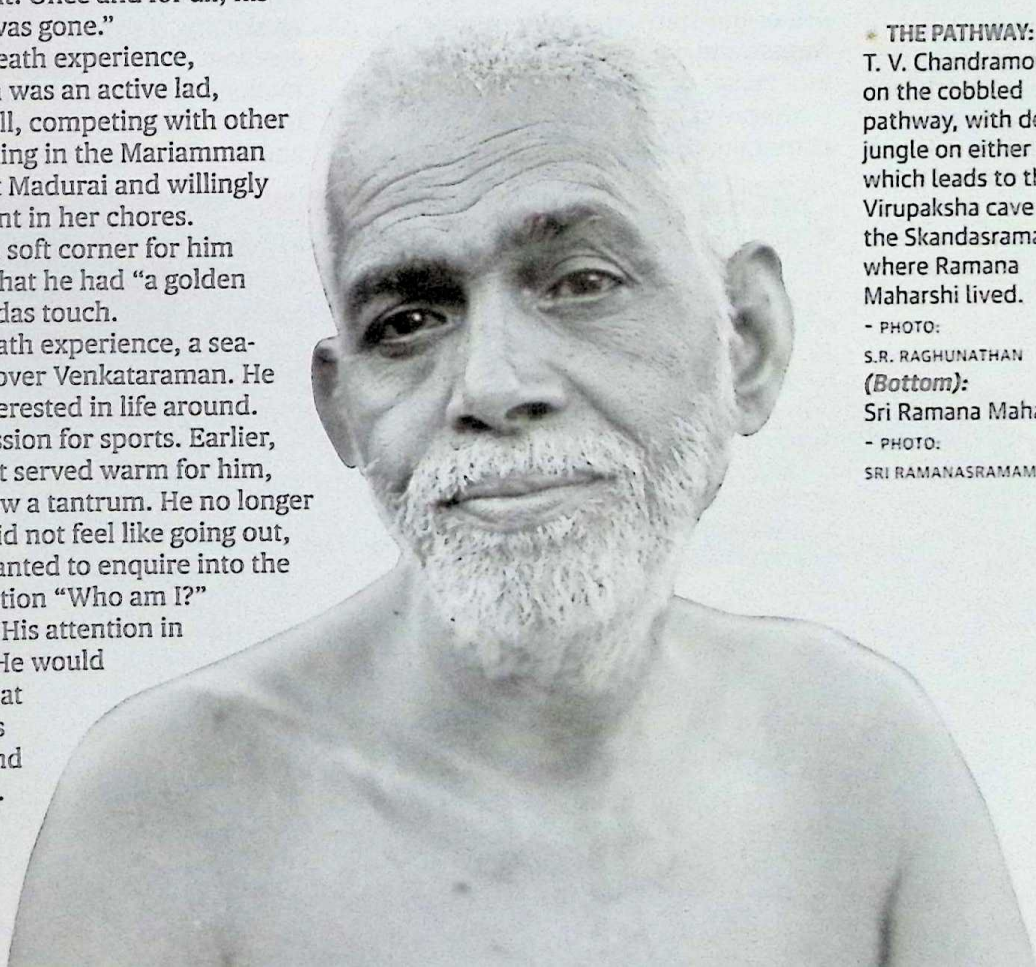
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

(Bottom):

Sri Ramana Maharshi.

- PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM





LIFE STORY-II

Leaving the world behind

The young, spiritually-inclined Venkataraman left behind his worldly life to become a renunciate

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪



At home, Venkataraman would often close his eyes and be in a meditative state. People at home noticed this. They could not figure out what change had occurred in him. Since he lost interest in worldly affairs, he could not concentrate on his studies," K.S. Kannan, Office Manager, Sri Ramanasramam, says. He would sit alone at home and be absorbed in the Self or the Spirit. His elder brother Nagaswami would ridicule him, calling him "yogi" or "sage".

Bhagavan himself said later, "The consequences of this new awareness

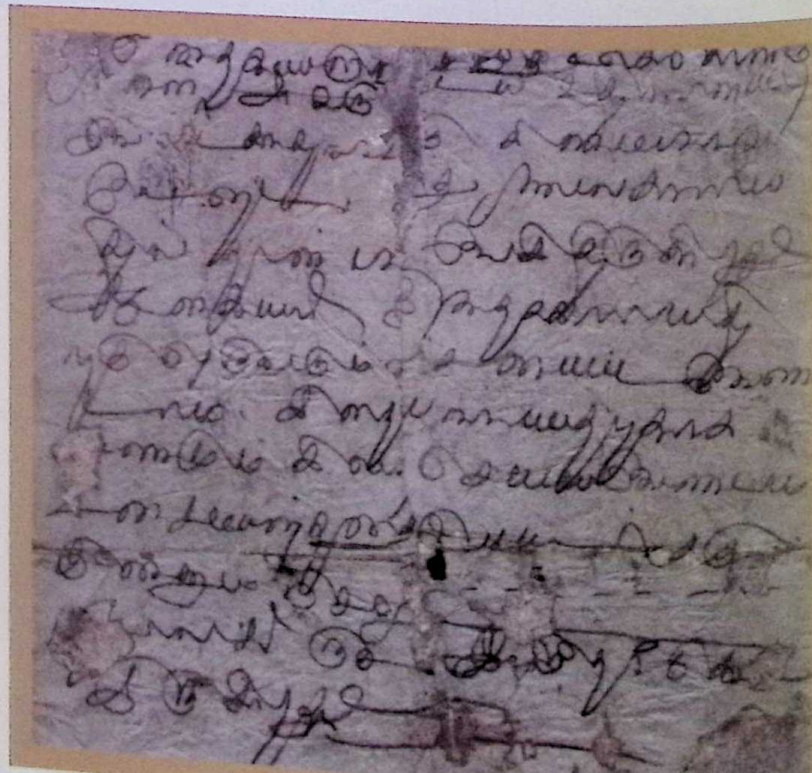
were soon noticed in my life. In the first place, I lost what interest I had in my outer relationship with relatives and friends and went through my studies mechanically... One of the features of my new state was my changed attitude to the Meenakshi temple. Formerly, I used to go there occasionally with friends to look at the idols and put the sacred ash and vermilion on my forehead, and would return home almost unmoved. But after the awakening, I went there almost every evening... I used to go alone and stand motionless for a long time before an image of Siva, Meenakshi or Nataraja and the 63 saints, and as I stood there,

• THE GREAT DEPARTURE:

The letter that Venkataraman wrote in Tamil on August 29, 1896, announcing his departure from his Madurai home. The letter is displayed in the archives/museum at Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai.

- PHOTO:

S.R. RAGHUNATHAN





waves of emotion overwhelmed me.”
(*Bhagavan Sri Ramana, A Pictorial Biography.*)

Venkataraman's lack of interest in studies showed in school. His English teacher asked him to write some portion from Alexander Baine's book on English grammar three times.

What are you doing here?

On Saturday, August 29, 1896, when Venkataraman had finished writing the imposition twice, he could not concentrate any more on it. Nagaswami, who was watching all this, remarked, “If you are going to live like a sadhu, what are you doing here, in this house?” The barb hit home. Venkataraman, remembered hearing about “Arunanachala” and it acted as a *sphurana* (shining forth) inside him. He knew Arunachala was Tiruvannamalai. He looked up an atlas which was at home. He found trains running from Madurai to Tindivanam, which was about 70 km from Tiruvannamalai. But it was an old atlas and did not show the new railway line that had been laid from Villupuram to Tiruvannamalai. Villupuram lay on the way from Madurai to Madras (now Chennai). Since it was a Saturday, Venkataraman told Nagaswami

that he had special classes to attend in school. His elder brother told him that there were five rupees in a box and asked him to pay that amount as his college fees on his way to school. Out of that five rupees, Venkataraman took Rs. 3 with him.

Then Venkataraman took out a piece of paper and wrote a letter in Tamil. It was not addressed to anybody. Venkataraman wrote: “I have, / in search of my Father and in obedience to his command, started from here. This is only embarking on a virtuous enterprise. Therefore, none need grieve over this affair. To trace this out, no money need be spent.

Your [college] fee has not been paid. Rupees two, are enclosed herewith.
Thus,”

As B.V. Narasimha Swami says in the most authentic biography of Ramana, titled *Self-Realisation, The Life and Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi* (first published in 1938 by Sri Ramanasramam), “The letter throws clear

* JYOTI DARSHAN:

(**Top**) The Atulya Nadheswara temple, built on a bedrock at Arayaninallur, where Venkataraman had a *jyoti darshan*.

- PHOTO

SRI RAMANASRAMAM.

(**Below**): K.S. Kannan, Office Manager, Sri Ramanasramam.

- PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



light on the all-interesting question of Venkataraman's state of mind when he left Madurai for good, and the progress that had been made by him in ethical and spiritual fields. One would like to know whether he left Madurai, casting "a lingering, lingering look behind", as thoughts of hearth and home, kith and kin, and friends and former scenes of joyous or other emotions passed

before his mind's eyes, and whether sympathetic sorrow welled up in his heart to think of the grief that would be caused to his mother and others in losing him..." But as Narasimha Swami adds, "Strangely enough, none of these thoughts appear to have distressed him."

What is to be noted here is that Venkataraman did not sign the letter with his name. There is a long dash



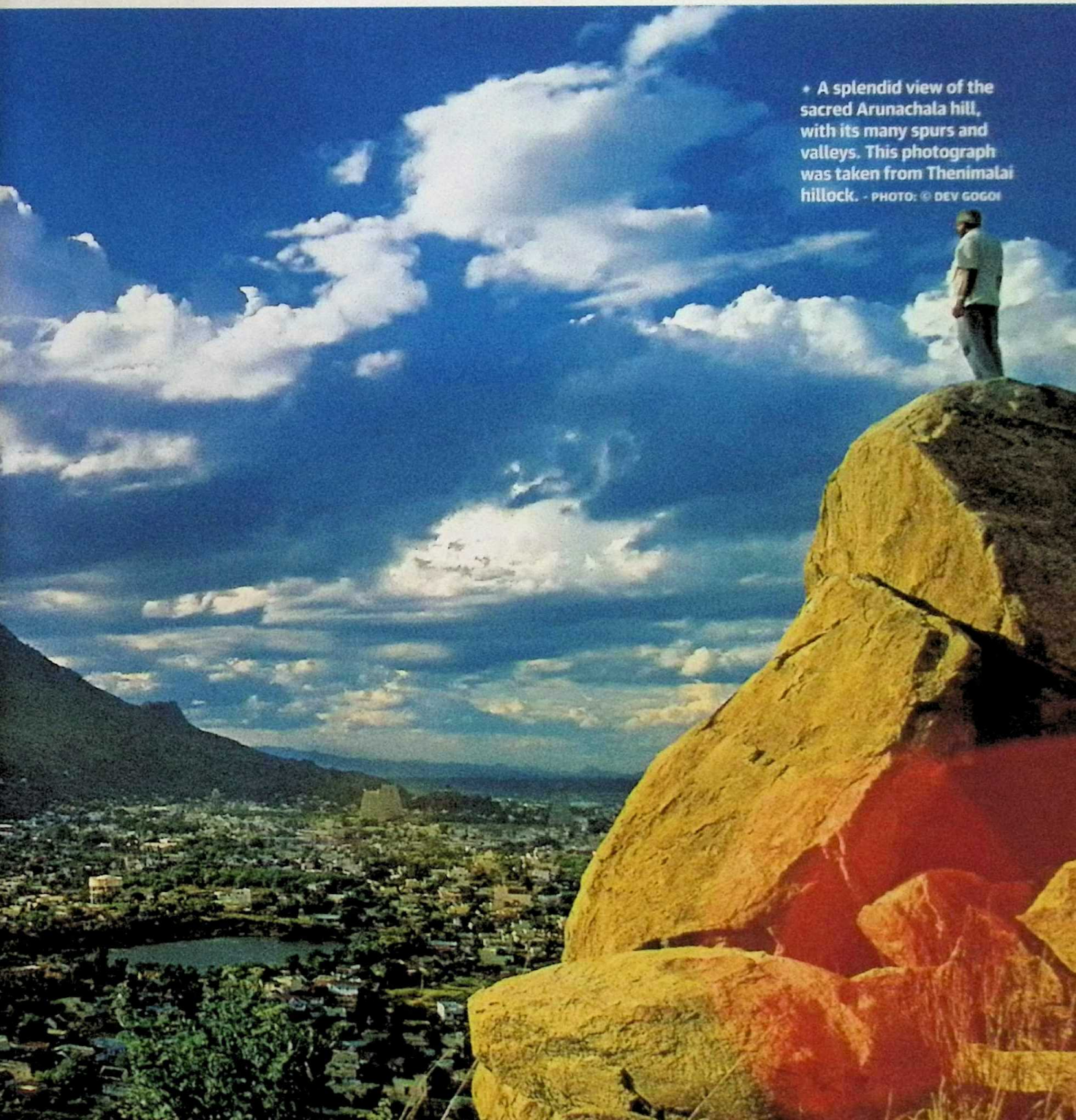
instead. Besides, the letter first begins with "I". In the subsequent sentences, it becomes an impersonal "this." He says that he has "started from here" in "search of my Father" but does not deliberately mention his destination. In the postscript, there is neither "I" nor "this." It merely tells his brother, "Your fees have not yet been paid." As Narasimha Swami pointedly observes

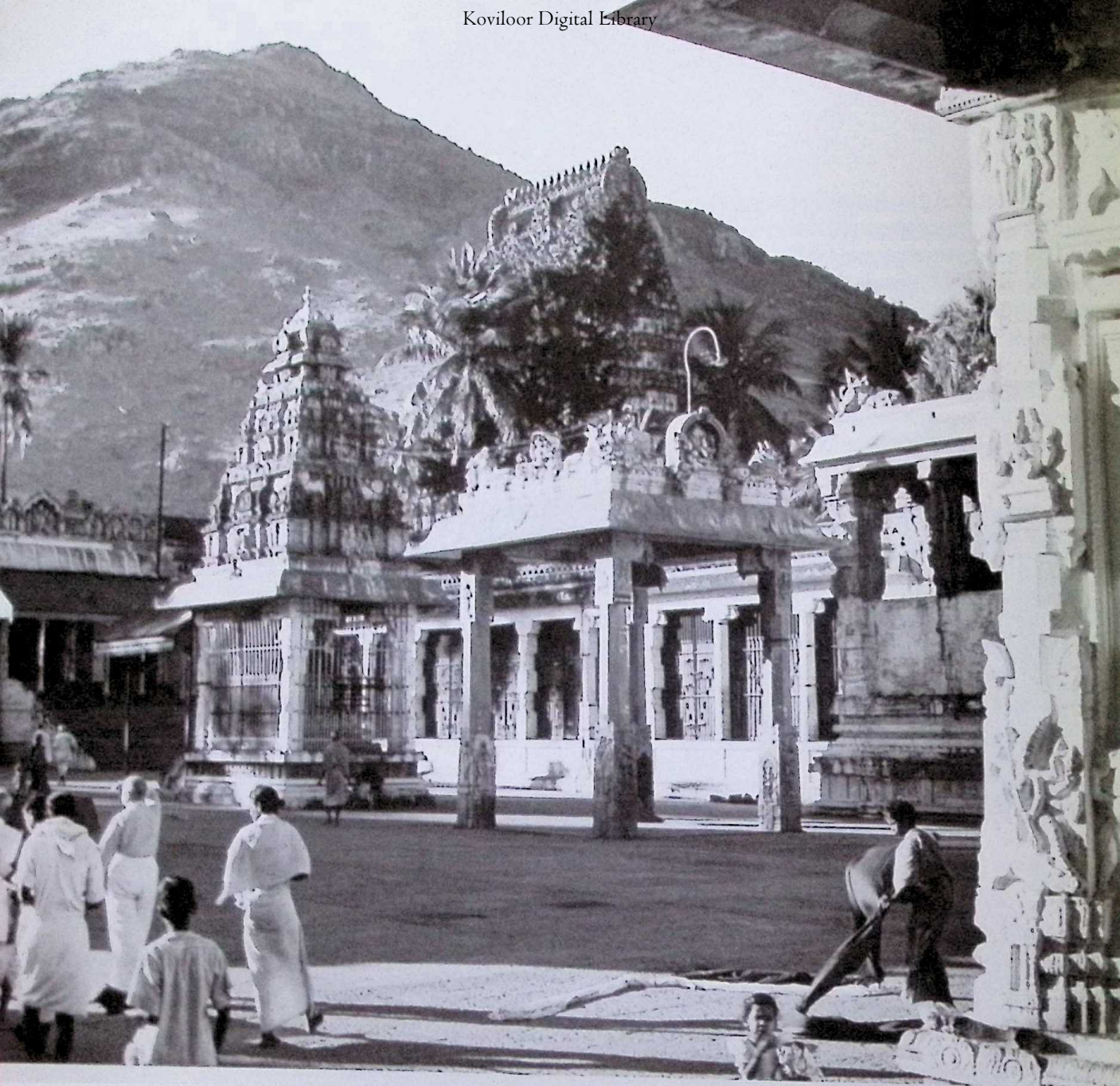
in his book, "It [the letter] is purely impersonal. How eloquent are these indications of the alteration in his personality!"

The journey

It was around 12 noon when Venkataraman walked out on his home. The Madurai railway junction was about 1.4 km from his residence. The

• A splendid view of the sacred Arunachala hill, with its many spurs and valleys. This photograph was taken from Thenimalai hillock. - PHOTO: © DEV GOGOI





• **MAJESTIC
RAJAGOPURA:**

A few mantapas, shrines and the *rajagopura* of Sri Arunachaleswarar temple in the backdrop of the Arunachala hill. G. G. Welling took this picture in 1946.

— PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

train to Tindivanam was to depart from Madurai railway station around 12 noon. Venkataraman reached the station late. As Providence would have it, the train arrived late as well. He had time to look up the table of trains at the station and saw the name Tindivanam. A few lines below was mentioned the name of the Tiruvannamalai railway station. He failed to register it. From the Rs. 3 he had with him, he bought a ticket to Tindivanam. It cost him two rupees and 12 annas. He had the remaining three annas with him. No sooner did the train arrive than he jumped into a compartment.

He took a seat and was soon absorbed in himself. There was a Muslim *moulvi* sitting in the opposite seat. He noticed that the handsome Brahmin lad with a fair complexion and curly locks was

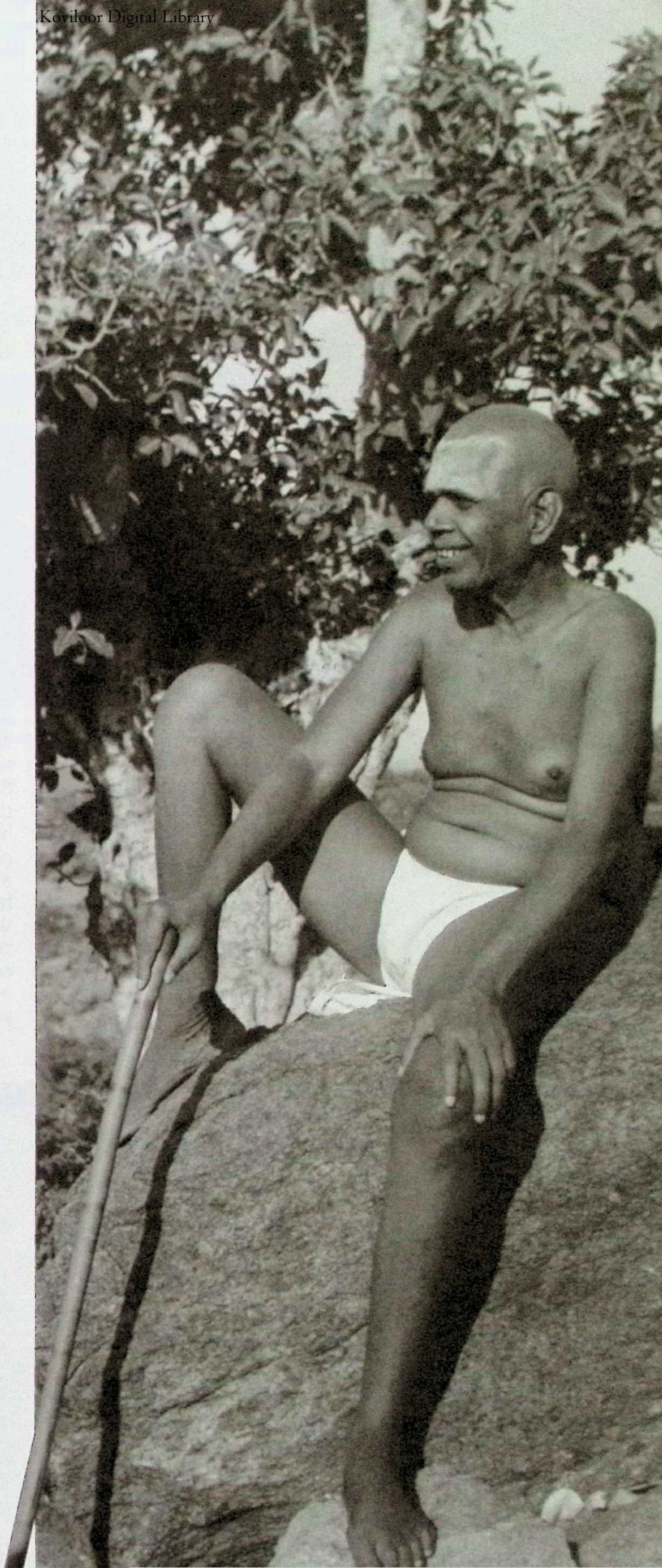
immersed in meditation. The *moulvi* noted that the lad had no luggage and struck up a conversation with him. "Where are you going, swami?" he asked the youth. "To Tiruvannamalai," was the terse reply. The *moulvi* prised out the information from the youth that the latter had bought a ticket to Tindivanam and told him that the train was taking a circuitous route to Tindivanam. He told the youth to get down at Villupuram, which was situated ahead of Tindivanam. From Villupuram, he could catch a train to Tiruvannamalai, the *moulvi* suggested. After receiving this information, Venkataraman closed his eyes and went inward again. When he woke up, the *moulvi* was gone.

Around 3 a.m. the next day (August 30), the train pulled into Villupuram

station and Venkataraman got down. He bought two country pears (*berikkai* in Tamil). He had two and a half annas left with him. He finished eating one. In the excitement of heading towards his Father's home, Arunachala (Tiruvannamalai), his stomach felt full. He threw away the other *berikkai*. He walked into Villupuram town and wandered about till dawn broke. He had had no lunch or dinner the previous day on the train. He was hungry. He reached a hotel.

Its proprietor told him to wait till noon for a meal. Soon Venkataraman went into a trance. The hotel owner's interest was piqued when he noticed that the lad had no belongings or luggage. He noted that the youth with a serene face, wearing gold earrings studded with rubies, had fallen into a deep meditative state. Venkataraman ate the meal when it was ready and proffered two annas to the hotel owner who asked him how much money he had with him. "Two and a half annas," came the reply. The hotel owner magnanimously declined to accept the money.

After the meal, Venkataraman left for Villupuram station. He did not have enough money to buy a ticket to Tiruvannamalai station and so he bought a ticket to Mambazhapattu. He reached Mambazhapattu late in the afternoon and decided to traverse the distance to Tiruvannamalai, about 30 miles away, by foot. He had trudged about ten miles when the Atulya Nadheswara temple at Arayaninallur, built on a bed-rock and a hill in the background, loomed into view. Dusk was falling and he was tired when he reached the temple. Its priest came and opened the temple doors to perform the evening puja. So Venkataraman entered the temple and sat in its front, pillared *mantapa*. He soon had a vision of a great *jyoti* (dazzling light) flooding the dark *mantapa*. Tirugnana Sambandar, the boy poet-saint, who is one of the 63 Saivite Nayanmars, had such a "jyoti darshan" when he entered the same temple in circa eighth century CE. But Venkataraman was not aware of Tirugnana Sambandar's "jyoti



darshan". Convinced that "this must be the appearance of the God here", Venkataraman quickly reached the sanctum sanctorum to see if the light had emanated from the Sivalingam there named Atulya Nadheswara. He saw that the light did not come from there. He returned to the *mantapa* and sank into a *samadhi*-like state. The priest shouted out to Venkataraman to come out of the *mantapa* because he wanted to lock the temple. Hungry, the lad asked the priest for some food. Not only did the priest rudely say, "There is no food here!" but he ordered him out of the temple.

Soon, the priest, the temple drummer, its cook and Venkataraman marched to the Viratteswara temple at Kilur, about half a mile away. The priest performed the evening puja and did the *naivedhyam* of the food cooked there. Venkataraman again asked the priest for food and the latter curtly said, "No." The temple drummer who had watched the priest say "no" twice, took pity on Venkataraman. "Why, sir, give him my

share," said the drummer. With a plate of cooked rice, the lad was directed to a Sastri's house nearby to get some water.

The next morning, Monday, August 31, 1896, was Gokulashtami, Krishna Jayanthi day. Venkataraman was hungry and did not have enough money to buy a train ticket to Tiruvannamalai, 20 miles away. He reached the residence of a Muthukrishna Bhagavathar and requested him for water.

Muthukrishna Bhagavathar and his sister saw the boy's plight and served him a meal. Venkataraman told Muthukrishna Bhagavathar that he was on a pilgrimage but had lost his money and luggage on the way. He told the Bhagavathar that he wanted to pledge his earrings with the latter and asked him for Rs. 4. (The gold earrings set with rubies were worth Rs. 20). Bhagavathar took the earrings, gave the lad Rs. 4 and a receipt for it with his home address written out so that the earrings could be redeemed later. Bhagavathar also insisted on his getting the lad's address. His sister, a generous-hearted woman, gave Venkataraman a packet of sweets made for *Gokulashtami*. After Venkataraman left their home, he tore up the receipt for the earrings that Muthukrishna Bhagavathar had given him. This was his first act of renunciation. It signalled that he would not return home. He reached the railway station, spent the night there, bought a

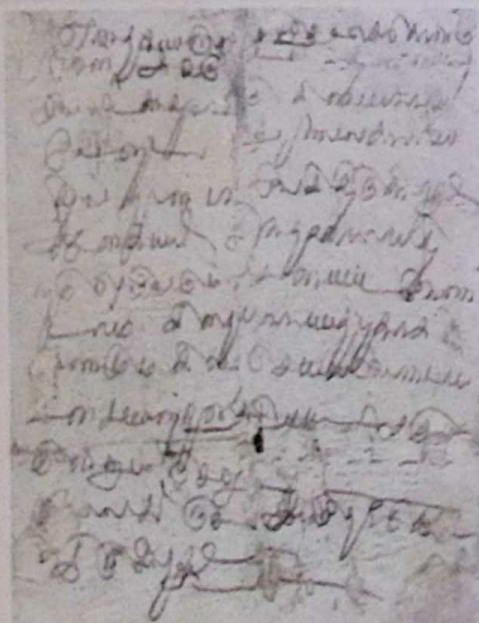
• THE EPISTLE:

the letter written in Tamil by Venkataraman on August 29, 1896 when he walked out on his home in Madurai. This is displayed in the Madurai house.

- PHOTO: G. MOORTHY



After Venkataraman left their home, he tore up the receipt for the earrings that Muthukrishna Bhagavathar had given him



என் என் தம்பனாவது... have, in search of my Father and in obedience to
அவருடைய உத்தரவின்படி... demand, started from here. THIS is only embarking
விட்டுக் கிளம்பி விட்டேன். This is only embarking on a
... enterprise. Therefore none need grieve
... THIS affair. To trace THIS out, no money need
ஆகையால் இந்தக் காரியத்திற்கு ஒன்றும்
செலவாக வேண்டாம். இதைப் பார்ப்பதற்காக
... செலவு செய்ய வேண்டாம்.
உன் சம்பளத்தை இன்னும் } இப்படிக்கு. Your College fee has not been
செலுத்தவில்லை. ரூ 2 } paid. Rupees Two are enclosed
இதோடு கூட இருக்கிறது. } herewith. Thus,

பகவான தனது 16 ஆவது வயதில் ஞானம் அடைந்த பிறகு 29/8/1896 அன்று இந்த
விடம் விட்டு புறப்படும்போது இங்கு இருந்த அலமாரியில் எழுதி வைத்த கடிதம்



ticket to Tiruvannamalai station the next morning, which was September 1, 1896. The train steamed in, he got into it and reached Tiruvannamalai two hours later.

Act of renunciation

Venkataraman walked into the town and sighted the Arunachala hill. A welter of emotions welled up in him. It was around 11 a.m (on September 1, 1896). He went straight to the Arunachaleswara temple complex, whose massive doors were open. With speeding steps, he crossed several corridors and reached the *garbha griha*. Its doors were open too. There was nobody inside the *garbha griha*. Venkataraman entered it, tightly embraced the Sivalingam there and declared with ecstasy: "Father, I have arrived in obedience to your command. From now on, your wish is my wish."

According to Kannan, Sri Ramana Maharshi had gone on record that till then, after his death experience, his body used to feel aflame. After he embraced the Sivalingam, the heat was quenched.

Venkataraman then exited the temple complex, wandered about the Tiruvannamalai town and reached Ayyankulam, a few kilometres away. As its name implies, a large tank is situated there, with steps on all its sides. In the

backdrop, a couple of kilometres away, are seen the temple *gopuras* (towers) rising majestically into the air and there is Arunachala hill behind. In front of the tank is a shrine for saint Arunagirinathar, who was born in Tiruvannamalai.

Venkataraman bathed in the Ayyankulam tank. On its steps, several barbers were plying their trade. One of them called out to Venkataraman and asked him whether he wanted to tonsure his head. Soon, Venkataraman was shorn of his curly hair.

Then something overcame him. He removed the sacred thread, the *yagnobhaveetham*, from his body and discarded it. He threw away the money he had.

He tossed out the packet of sweets that Muthukrishna Bhagavathar's sister had so lovingly given him. While he did so, he exclaimed in Tamil, "Why feed this block?" (*kattai* in Tamil). He tore a piece from his white dhoti and wore it as a *koupinam* (loin-cloth). He threw away the remaining portion of the dhoti. It was a custom to take a bath after a tonsure. There is Providence in the fall of a sparrow, goes the belief. It started raining then and Venkataraman was bathed. He had made up his mind not to go back home ever. His act of renunciation was complete.

★ THE RENUNCIATION:

The tank at Ayyankulam, Tiruvannamalai, where Venkataraman threw away his sacred thread, money and snacks, and took to wearing a loin-cloth.

- PHOTO:

C. VENKATACHALAPATHY



LIFE STORY III

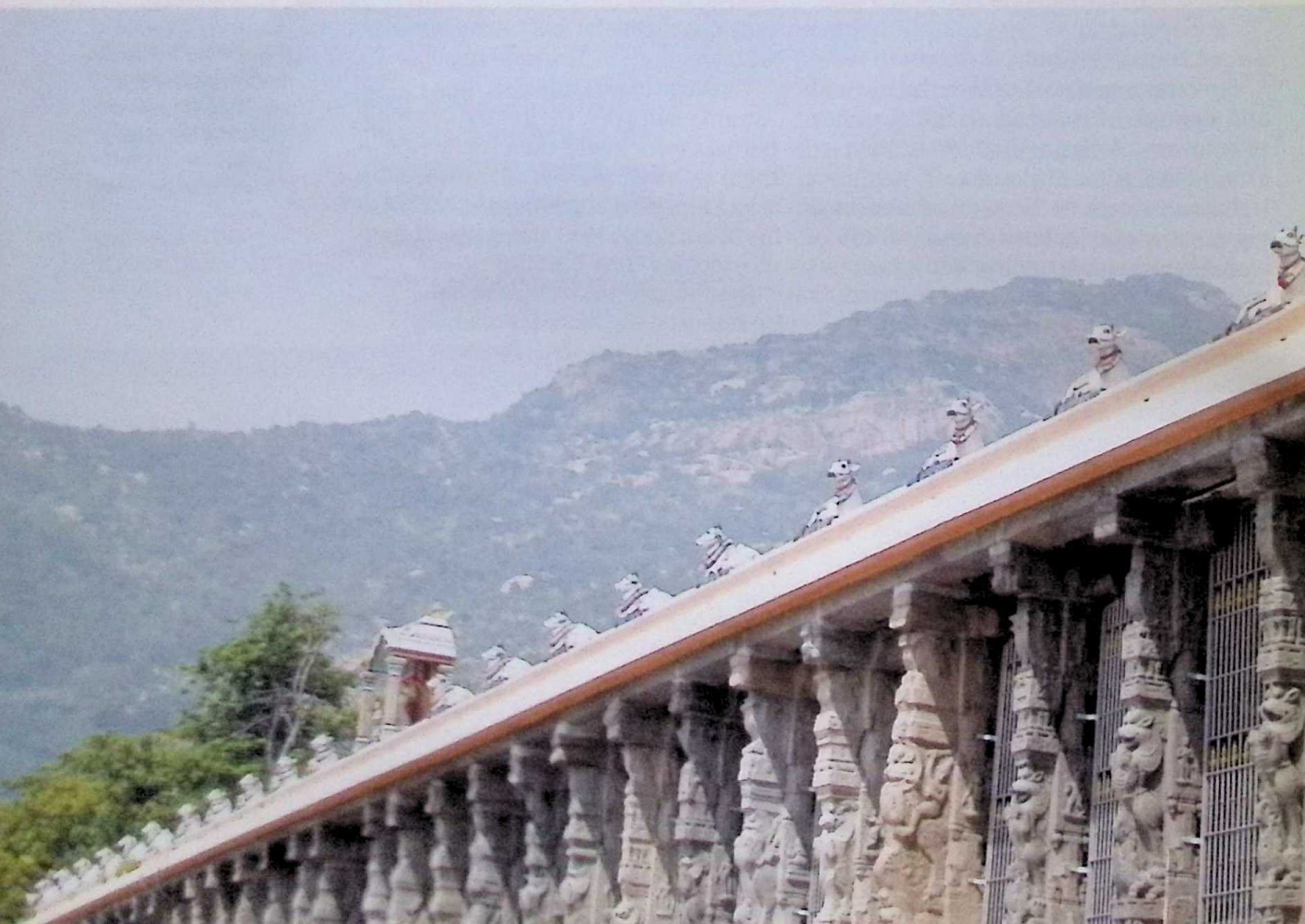
Journey into Self-realisation

After becoming a renunciate, the young Venkataraman took to the life of a sadhu. A glimpse into his time of intense meditation

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

*F*rom Ayyankulam, Venkataraman reached the Arunachaleswara temple, sat inside its massive 1,000 pillared mantapa and sank into a *nishtai*. He ate nothing on the first day. He paced

up and down in front of the 16-pillared mantapa on the second day of his arrival at the temple. Hunger gnawed him but he had no money to buy food. At that time, a mendicant called Mauni Swami, who was given to silence, came to the temple. Palaniswamy, who would



often clean the temple precincts, also arrived at the 16-pillared *mantapa*. As the Maharshi recalled later, "Then the Mauni, looking at me, a stranger here, being in a hungry and exhausted condition, made signs to Palaniswamy that I should be given some food. Thereupon, Palaniswamy went and brought some cold rice in a tin vessel [*thagara dabba* in Tamil] which was all black, with a little salt strewn on top of the rice. That was the first *bhiksha* which Arunachaleswara gave me!" (From *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, *From the Diary of A. Devaraja Mudaliar*, first published in 1968 by Sri Ramanasramam.)

The life of a renunciate

For the next several weeks, the 1,000-pillared *mantapa* was Venkataraman's "residence". He sank again into "the Bliss of Being... Day after day, day and night, he sat unmoving... and was turned inwards." (From *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self*

Knowledge by Arthur Osborne, 1997, Sri Ramanasramam). Venkataraman observed a vow of silence.

The 1,000-pillared *mantapa* is an architectural splendour, built of granite, by the Vijayanagara emperor Krishnadevaraya in the 1510s. The pillars have wonderful sculptures of prancing *yalis*, warriors on horses, carvings, etc. The pillars support the *mantapa*'s roof made of long granite slabs. Since the *mantapa* was open on all sides, cold wind from the nearby Arunachala hill blew through it. As Narasimha Swami says so poignantly in his book, *Self-Realisation*: "He [Venkataraman] sat there during his period of *samadhi*, and its cold slabs were his bed, without so much as a cloth, much less a mat, a rug, or shawl to spread on them; his arm was his pillow; his palm was his plate; and any rag found by the wayside was his dress."

On the night of September 1, 1896 it rained hard. Venkataraman, was bare-

★ MASSIVE EDIFICE:

The 1000-pillared *mantapa* built by emperor Krishnadevaraya in the 1510s in the Arunachaleswara temple.

Venkataraman stayed in this *mantapa* for a few months from September 1, 1896.

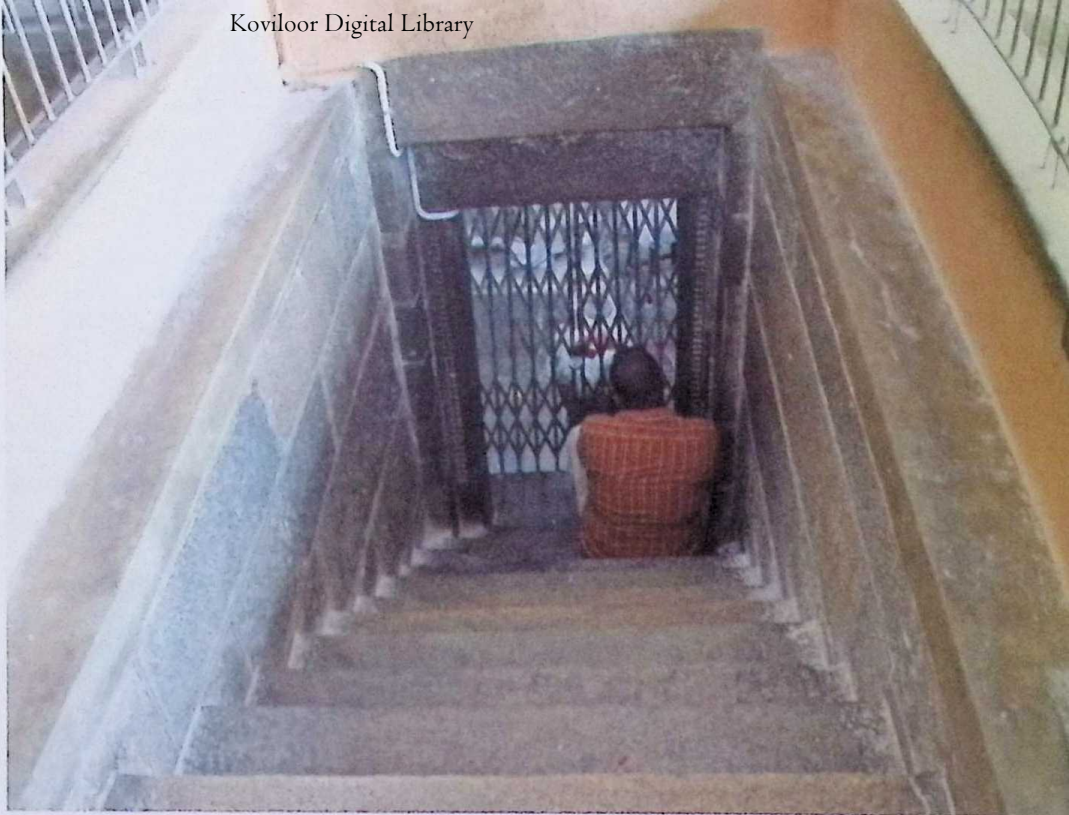
- PHOTO:

C. VENKATACHALAPATHY



WHO AM I?

* **THE UNDERGROUND VAULT: (Top)** The steps leading down to the Patala Lingam shrine in the Arunachaleswarar temple, where Venkataraman was in a trance for many days while ants, wasps and termites feasted on his thighs. - PHOTO: C. VENKATACHALAPATHY
(Bottom): The Patala Lingam. - PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM



bodied, wearing only a *koupinam*, with nothing to cover him. He was shivering. So he ran here and there to keep himself warm. Then he ran out into a street and slept on the *thinmai* (open porch) of a house.

He returned to the *mantapa* as dawn broke, and sank into a state of *samadhi* again. On some days, he would go out and beg in a street for food. If somebody came out of a house and offered him food, he received it in his bare hands. He ate the food near the house and rubbed his palms on his head. He would not beg for food in another house, nor would not eat again for the day. He begged for food from Chinna Gurukkal's (the temple priest) wife the first time. Since he received the food in his cupped palms, people started calling him *Kara Paathira Swamy*, that is, the sadhu who used his palms as a vessel to receive food. If he had begged in one house, he would never go there again. Ramana later said that there was not a street in Tiruvannamalai town where he did not beg. He never sought money as alms. One day, Ramana's devotee T.P. Ramachandra Aiyar's father, pained by the young sadhu's condition, took him home by force and fed him.

When Sri Ramana Maharshi was asked about his early days in Tiruvannamalai and about accepting alms, he had this to say: "You cannot conceive of the majesty and dignity I felt while begging..."

In the 1,000-pillared *mantapa*, Venkataraman largely kept to himself,

sinking into *nishtai* and remaining silent. He went out only to beg for food. His name spread in the town. Devotees, who came to the temple, marvelled at the radiance of his face and the *vairagya* that lay behind his silence. They paid obeisance to him and called him "Brahmana Swamy".

Urchins who had seen the sadhu begging on the Tiruvannamalai streets, were intrigued by his wearing only a *koupinam*, often getting into a trance at the *mantapa*, and observing silence. To find out whether he was real, because he was their age, they threw stones at him in the *mantapa*. Once, when the young Swamy was seated in the *mantapa's* central platform, there was a simultaneous double attack. A fusillade of stones rained on him from behind and from in front of him. The unruly boys would earlier give the same treatment to one Seshadri, who had come to Tiruvannamalai about five years earlier



and would be seen walking up and down the town's streets. The urchins thought he was not in his senses and threw stones at him. This Seshadri later became the revered Seshadri Swamigal. A temple, including a shrine, was built for him, adjacent to the present campus of Sri Ramanasramam.

Seshadri Swamigal had an avuncular affection for the young sadhu, Venkataraman. When he saw the young sadhu becoming a target of the stone-pelting urchins, he took upon himself the task of protecting him. He often chased away the urchins.

Intense penance

In order not to invite more trouble, Venkataraman, who came to be called "Chinna Seshadri" (the Little Seshadri), relocated to the Patala Lingam shrine in the *mantapa*. As its name implies, the Sivalingam was inside an underground vault. But the shrine was in ruins. It was dark and damp, with termite hills, and a musty smell filled the air. It was a den of ants, wasps, nettles and termites. The Brahmana Swamy sat behind the *lingam* and went into a *nishtai*. He was totally absorbed in himself and the ecstasy of being. He was unaware of the world outside. Some pious people discovered where he was. Several times, they placed food in his mouth. But it just remained on the lips. Ratnammal, wife of Velayudha Chetti aka Velurar, boldly descended into the dark cavern, placed food before him and pleaded with him to come to her house. There was no response from the Swamy. Ratnammal also kept a big, clean white cloth in front of him and requested him to use it. When she returned after a few days, she found that the Swamy had not touched it. His hair had grown long and was matted. Long nails curled out from his fingers and toes.

In the meantime, ants, wasps, nettles, termites and centipedes, which were crawling under the thighs of the Swamy who was seated like a statue, feasted on the nether sides of his thighs. The thighs began suppurating with pus and blood. "Such was the intensity of his trance he never noticed the pests." (Narasimha Swami in his book *Self-Realisation*.) It

is not known how long the Brahmana Swamy remained in the vault. The urchin gang found out where he was and hurled stones inside with mischievous glee.

One day, a Venkatachala Mudaliar caught these boys in the act. Enraged, he chased them away. He was surprised to see Seshadri Swamigal emerging from the darkness of the Patala Lingam vault. Seshadri Swamigal told Venkatachala Mudaliar, "Go and look up *en thambi* [my younger brother] inside..." and walked away. Venkatachala Mudaliar gathered some people including Palaniswamy, and together, they descended into the pit. They were shocked to see the Swamy's thighs swarming with pests, ants and termites, and dripping with blood and pus. With some difficulty, the group lifted him up. His thighs had become stuck to the damp floor. They brought him out and saw that he had become skin and bones. They took him to the Gopuram-Subrahmanya shrine where Venkataraman stayed for some time. It was here that he regained consciousness.

Kannan asserts, "It was Seshadri Swamigal who brought him to the attention of the world. Till then, people thought that a *balan* [youth] was seated there, with his eyes closed." Ilayaraaja, the famed music composer, makes the same observation, "If Seshadri Swamigal had not seen him there, Bhagavan would have remained unnoticed forever." (See the interview with Ilayaraaja.)

On seeing the Chinna Seshadri's condition, the priest at the Unnamulai Amman shrine instructed the temple staff that he should be fed every day with the *abhishekha* milk mixed with turmeric, sugar and plantains. As it did not suit the sadhu, he was fed with pure milk from then on. However, the sadhu frequently relocated in the temple premises itself: from the 1,000-pillared *mantapa* to the *vahana mantapa*, sitting under the *vilva lingam* tree and then the *iluppai* tree, the Mangai Pillayar shrine and so forth. Although it was less than three months since he took up residence in the House of his Father, the Brahmana Swamy had already attracted the attention of the townsfolk and regular



• MAHAN: (Top) Sri Seshadri Swamikal

- PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM

(Bottom): The Gurumurtham shrine for Deivasigamani Desigar, where Venkataraman stayed for about a year, often in a state of Self-enquiry.

- PHOTO:

S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

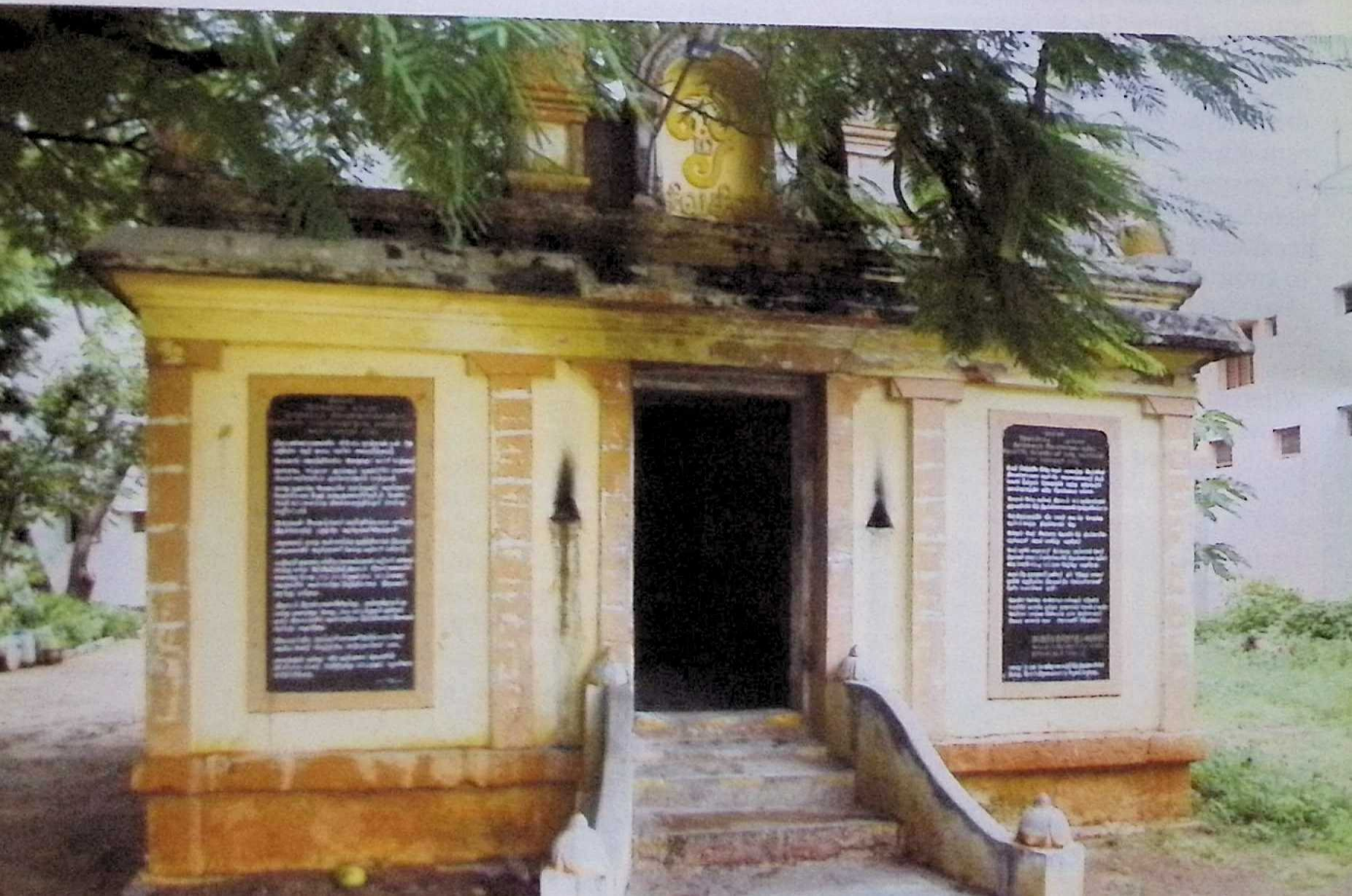
visitors to the temple, who had keenly noted his bright face, shining eyes, his lapsing into meditation, his wearing only rags as *koupinam* and remaining silent. People came in droves to receive his blessings.

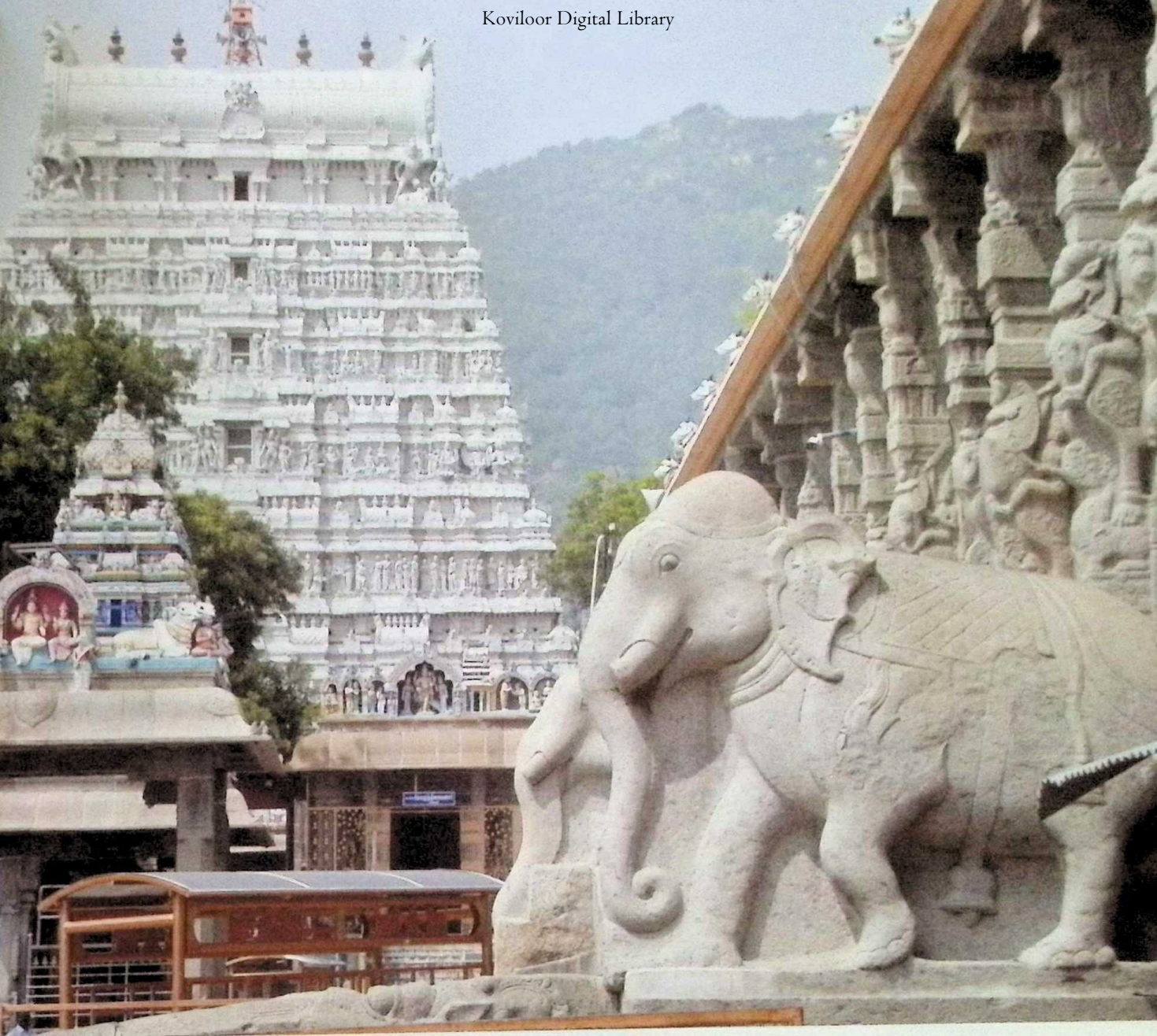
The first disciple

Since massive crowds would flock to the Arunachaleswara temple on *Karthigai Deepam* day and he would be constantly disturbed, it was suggested to the young sadhu that he find residence outside the temple. *Karthigai Deepam* day, which occurs in the Tamil month of *Karthigai* (December), is an important event in the calendar of festivities of the temple. On that day, a massive cauldron of fire is lit atop the Arunachala hill. Around this time, Uddandi Nayinar of Tirumani, near Wandiwash, became the first disciple of the young sadhu. He took upon himself the task of looking after the sadhu. Uddandi Nayinar, a deeply religious man, used to read out *Vasistham*, *Kaivalya Navaneetham* and other sacred books to the young sadhu, who silently imbibed them.

An Annamalai Tambiran of

Tiruvannamalai Aadheenam (Mutt), which was however headquartered in Kunrakkudi near Pudukkottai, joined Nayinar in protecting the Swamy. Annamalai Tambiran suggested to him that he shift to a shrine at place called Gurumurtham. According to Chandramouli, a saint called Deivasigamani Desigar had attained *samadhi* at Gurumurtham. Desigar had earlier lived in Srisailam, famed for its Siva temple, located in today's Andhra Pradesh. Tambiran's guru was Desigar. A Sivalingam was installed over Desigar's *samadhi* and a shrine built there. The shrine has a front *mantapa*. Chandramouli explained that Gurumurtham was a suburb of Tiruvannamalai, two kilometres away. Tambiran felt that if the young sadhu moved to the Gurumurtham shrine, he could continue his meditation there, unmolested. So the Brahmana Swamy shifted to the shrine's front *mantapa* at Gurumurtham. Tambiran would proffer him the *naivedya* offered at his guru's shrine. Tambiran would constantly sing in the presence of the Swamy, verses from *Thevaram*, which contains the





collection of poems sung by three Saivite poet-saints. They were Tirunavukkarasar alias Appar, Tirugnana Sambandar and Sundarar. The Swamy internalised the melodious songs from *Thevaram*. People flocked to Gurumurtham also to see the Swamy. Now, he came to be known as "Gurumurtham Swamy".

His ordeal of being targeted by red ants and insects continued in the *mantapa* at Gurumurtham. He would be immersed in total self-absorption, which would sometimes last a few days. When he was awake, he turned a *mauni*. Since ants attacked him, he was made to sit on a stool whose legs were kept in cups of water. However, since he leaned on the wall behind, the ants climbed on the wall and preyed on him. With matted hair and long nails, he looked like a sage of yore.

Sri Ramana Maharshi humourously recalled, "When I was at Gurumurtham, my nails grew about an inch long and I had a flowing *jata*, and people used to talk that I was very old in years though so young in appearance and that I existed like this for centuries!" (From *Day By Day with Bhagavan* by A. Devaraja Mudaliar.)

Tambiran was so devoted to Gurumurtham Swamy that he told the latter that he was making preparations to perform *abhishekha* on him. In other words, he would anoint the sadhu with milk, honey, rose water, oil, etc. The Swamy was taken aback by this bizarre proposal. So he wrote in Tamil with charcoal on the *mantapa* wall, இதற்குத் தொண்டு இதுவே. "This [providing food] itself is the service needed for this body." When Tambiran arrived later, the Swamy

• BEAUTIFUL ARCHITECTURE:

A few *mantapas*, a shrine, a *gopura* and the 1000-pillared *mantapa* in the Arunachaleswarar temple in the backdrop of the sacred hill.

- PHOTO:

C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

pointed to him the writing on the wall. The message went home. The incident had an unintended effect. People realised that the Gurumurtham Swamy, was literate and that he could write in Tamil.

Discovering he can write

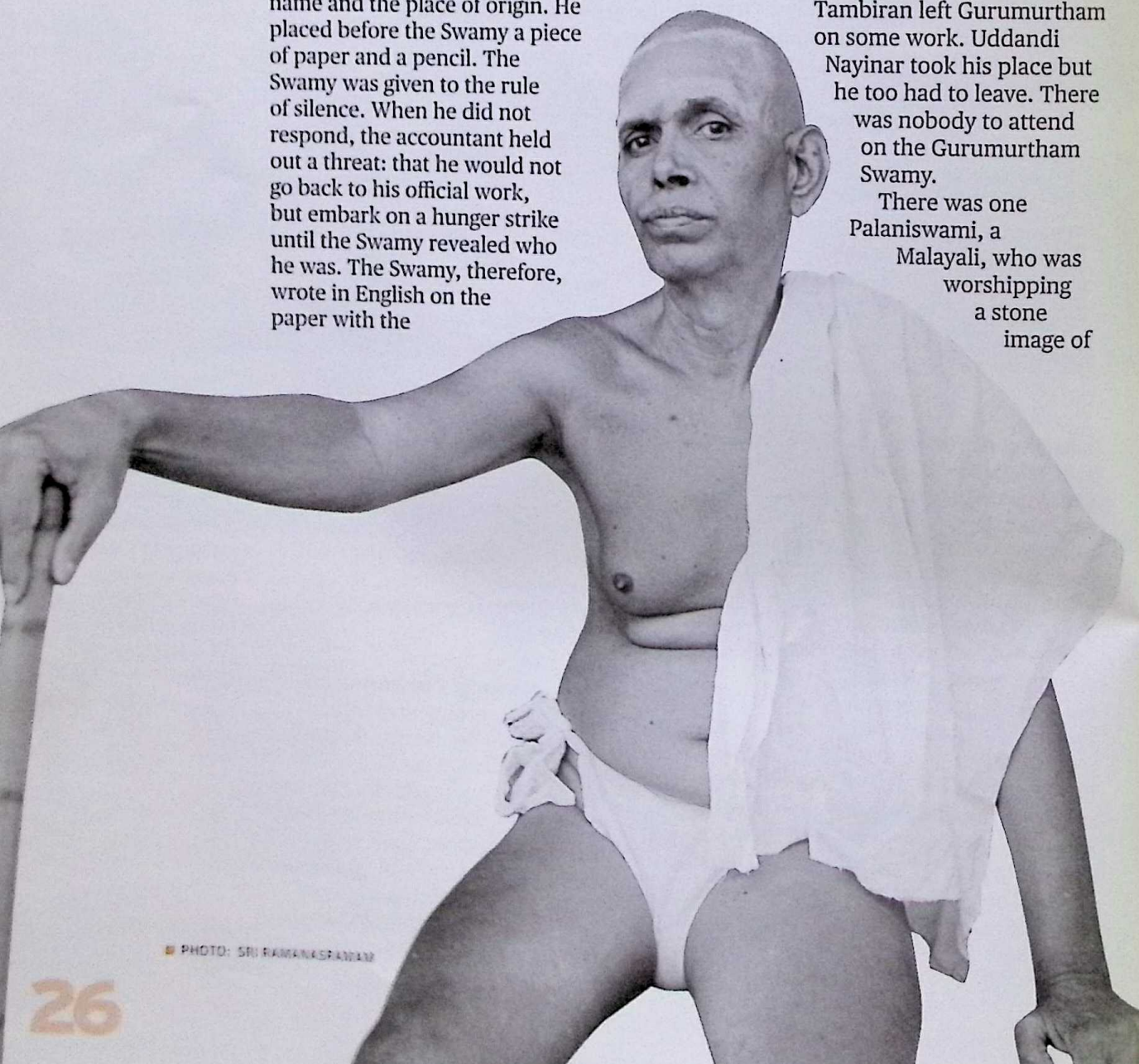
A series of dramatic incidents, all interconnected, took place in the wake of the word spreading that the mauni Swamy was literate. One of the scores of devotees who visited him regularly at Gurumurtham, was a taluq head accountant called Venkatarama Iyer. He had always wanted to know the Swamy's name and where he came from. Venkatarama Iyer, therefore, insisted one day in the presence of Tambiran and others, that he should know Swamy's name and the place of origin. He placed before the Swamy a piece of paper and a pencil. The Swamy was given to the rule of silence. When he did not respond, the accountant held out a threat: that he would not go back to his official work, but embark on a hunger strike until the Swamy revealed who he was. The Swamy, therefore, wrote in English on the paper with the

pencil, "Venkataraman, Tiruchuzhi." The accountant was puzzled because he had not heard of Tiruchuzhi. He asked the Swamy where it was located. The Swamy's eyes fell on the *Periya Puranam* book lying nearby. He pointed to the page in the book where one of the 63 saints, Sundarar, had sung a *Pathigam* (a collection of ten verses) about the Bhuminathar temple at Tiruchuzhi.

A.R. Natarajan reasons in his biography of Sri Ramana Maharshi, titled *Timeless in Time* (Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning, Bengaluru), "Ramana was always compassionate. Perhaps, he also felt that it was time for the news about his whereabouts to be known to his mother... In this sense, he allowed himself to be discovered."

Tambiran left Gurumurtham on some work. Uddandi Nayinar took his place but he too had to leave. There was nobody to attend on the Gurumurtham Swamy.

There was one Palaniswami, a Malayali, who was worshipping a stone image of



Vinayaka on the edge of a pond near the town. One Srinivasa Iyer told him to serve a Swamy in flesh and blood at Gurumurtham instead of spending his time on a stone idol. When Palaniswami came to Gurumurtham and saw the Brahmana Swamy, he knew he had found his guru. He was older to the Swamy by thirty years. He became the sadhu's faithful attendant for the next twenty years. Palaniswami would beg in the town and bring that food for the Swamy. Both then shared it. With his one cup of meal a day, no exercise and no exposure to sunlight, the Gurumurtham Swamy became a bag of bones. He could not get up and walk.

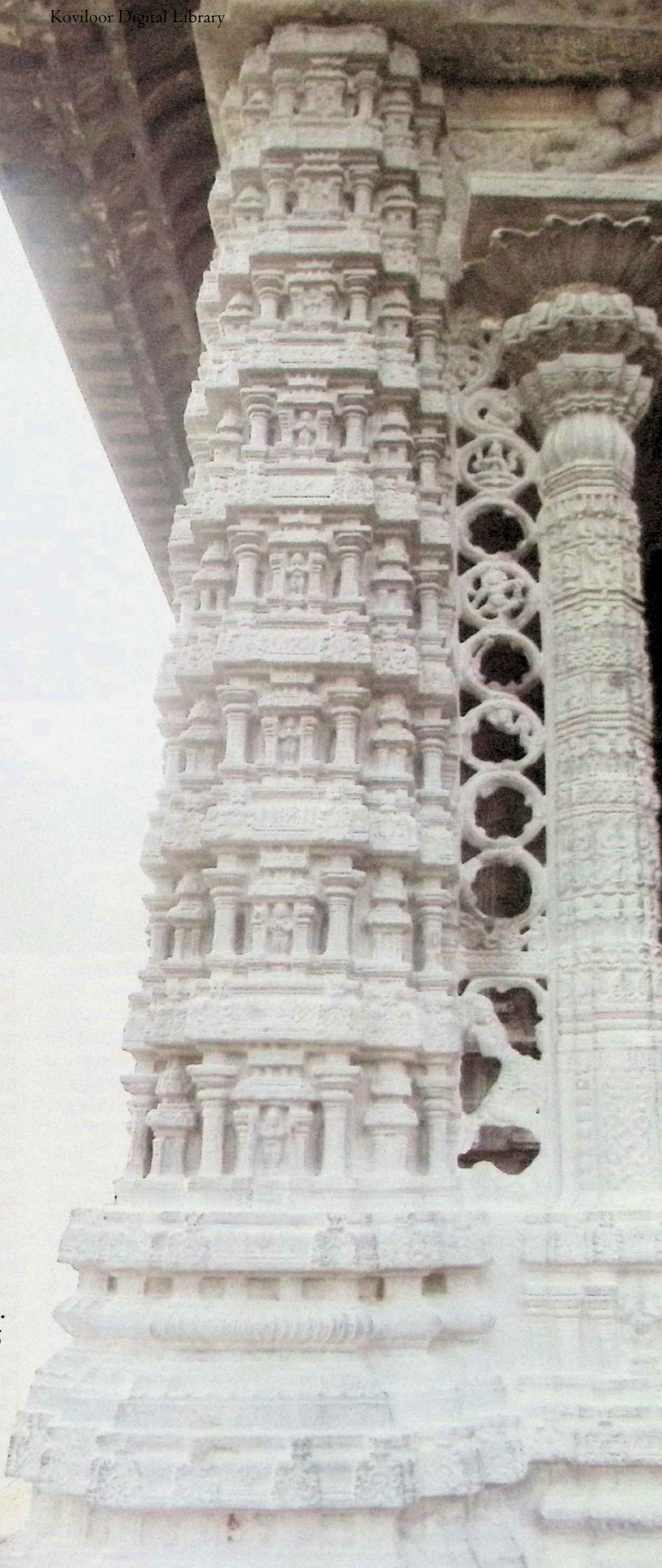
Palaniswami liked reading books in Tamil. He would go to a library in the town and bring books titled, *Kaivalya Navaneetham*, *Vedanta Chudamani*, *Vashistam* and others - all in Tamil, relating to Vedanta. He would struggle to read them. The Swamy saw his plight. "Swamy wishing to lighten Palaniswami's labour, took each book from him, rapidly absorbed its contents, and retaining the whole of it in his memory, imparted the gist of it to his wondering disciple." (From Narasimha Swami in *Self-Realisation*.) Palaniswami would read aloud the philosophical works in Malayalam and the Swamy would absorb their contents too.

By mixing with scholars in Malayalam, Telugu and Sanskrit, the Swamy attained proficiency in them. His mastery of these languages was such that he could compose poems in them. He wrote the poems in his own flowing hand. According to Chandramouli, Swamy wrote Sanskrit in Devanagari script. Sri Ramanasramam has published the Swamy's works in Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu, under the title *Thanga Kai* or the "Golden Hand".

With the number of persons coming to see the Swamy at Gurumurtham increasing day by day, the Swamy and Palaniswami decided to relocate.

• An ornate *mantapa*, with intricate carvings and tiny sculptures in the Arunachaleswarar temple.

- PHOTO: C. VENKATACHALAPATHY





LIFE STORY IV

A sadhu's life

*Living the life of a sadhu,
Venkataraman was discovered by his
family, but refused to return home*

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

*A*fter a year's stay at Gurumurtham, the Swamy and his disciple moved to a nearby mango grove owned by one Venkatarama Naicker. While one account says that Swamy and Palaniswami each stayed in a hut, another account says that each had a roofed *macha* built on two trees. Venkatarama Naicker told the orchard caretaker that nobody should disturb the Swamy.

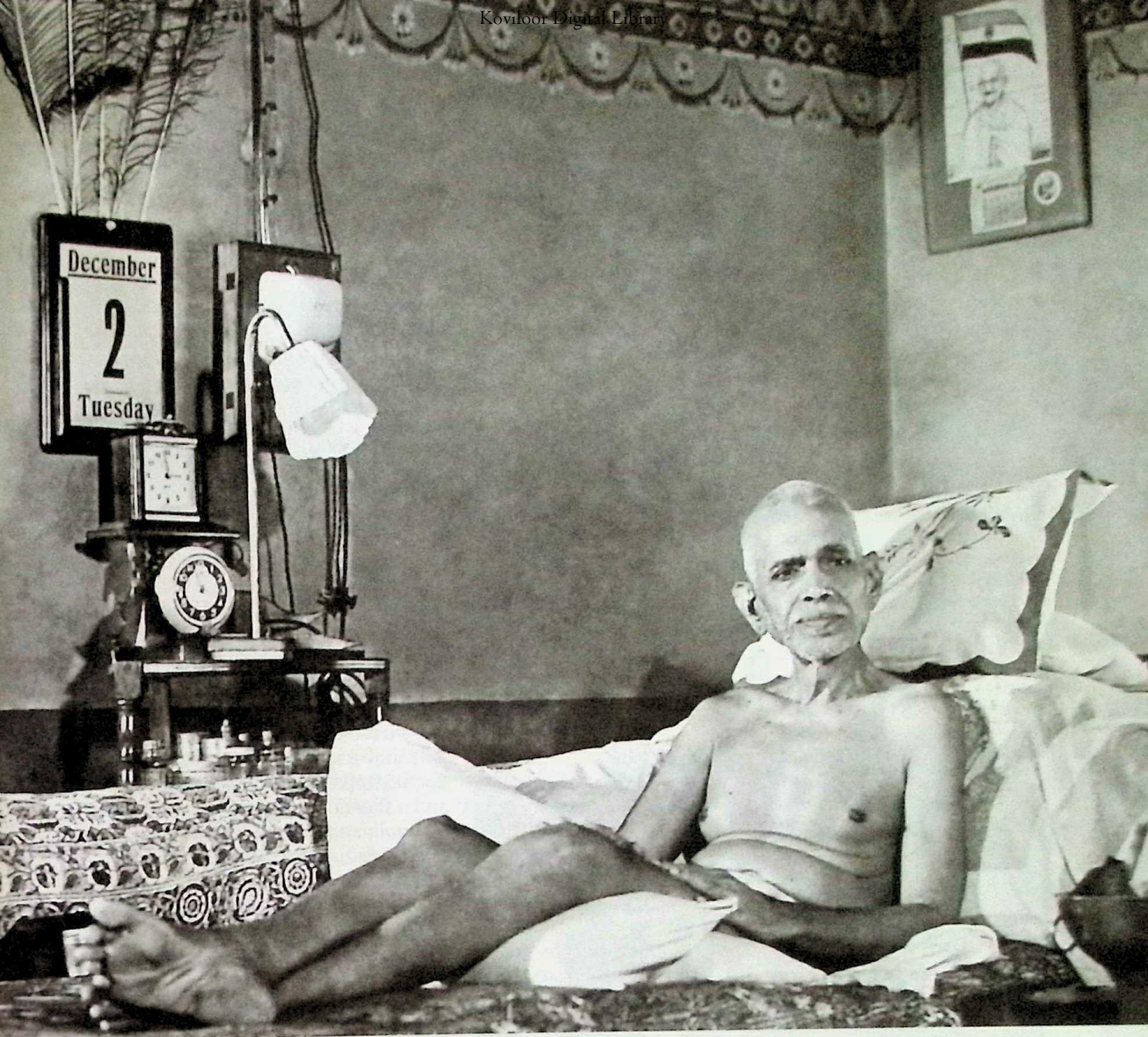
Meanwhile, Subbier (the Swamy's uncle, from whose house in Madurai, he had walked out) died there. Nelliappier, brother of Subbier, attended the funeral. A young man told those attending the funeral that Annamalai Tambiran had told him that a young sadhu named Venkataraman who was from Tiruchuzhi, was a respected holy man at Tiruvannamalai.

A son is found

When the news reached Nelliappier, he left immediately for Tiruvannamalai with a friend. They reached the mango grove, but Venkatarama Naicker refused to let them in saying that the sadhu was a *mouni* who should not be disturbed. But Naicker allowed them to send a note. Nelliappier took out a piece of paper he had with him and wrote on it, "Nelliappier, pleader of Manamadurai, wishes to see you." The Swamy recognised the handwriting. He allowed Nelliappier and his friend

to come in. They were shocked to see Venkataraman's unkempt condition and his emaciated frame. They pleaded with him to return home. He sat unmoved. He did not betray any emotion, nor did he speak a word. (Although he was observing silence, he would occasionally talk to Palaniswami at Gurumurtham.) Defeated, they returned to Madurai. Nelliappier wrote to Azhagammal conveying the happy tidings that Venkataraman was indeed a respected sadhu at Tiruvannamalai, but would not return home.

Kannan says, "Nelliappier was a soft-spoken man and Subbier, well-built. If Subbier had been alive, he would have bodily lifted the young Ramana and taken him away to Madurai." From the mango orchard, the Gurumurtham Swamy and his faithful Palaniswami moved to the pillared *mantapa* of the Arunagirinathar temple situated opposite to the Ayyankulam tank. The Swamy would beg in the *agraharam* streets - he would stand in front of a house and clap a few times indicating that he was asking for food. If the inmates gave him food, he would gulp it down and wipe his hands on his head. Palaniswami begged for food too, and shared whatever he got with the Swamy. Since the Brahmana Swamy did not want to be a burden on Palaniswami, he told him, "You go one way to beg for your food and I will go another. Let us not live together." It was a bolt from the blue for Palaniswami.



That day, he alone ate what he got, but returned to the Swamy in the evening. "I cannot be away from you," he told the Swamy. The latter relented. For the next 20 years, Palaniswami served the Swamy with unalloyed devotion. Palaniswami died in 1918. He was buried some distance away from the foot of the hill. The Maharshi attended his funeral.

When Venkataraman had walked out of his home on August 29, 1896, there was turmoil in the family. His mother Azhagammal was heartbroken. She and Nelliappier had searched for him in many places including Thiruvananthapuram.

So Azhagammal's cup of joy was full on learning that Venkataraman had been located. When her eldest son, Nagaswami, who had bagged a job in the Registration Department, obtained leave of absence in December

1898, they left for Tiruvannamalai. Meanwhile, Gurumurtham Swamy had left the mango orchard and moved to Pavazhakkunru on the Arunachala hill. As the name suggests, an old Siva temple, built on a low-slung bed rock, is located there. Inside the built-up temple, there is a naturally-formed tiny cavern. In the sanctum sanctorum is a Sivalingam. Behind it is a carved image of Ardhanariswara (Siva manifesting himself as half-woman and half-man). The belief is that after Parvati left the ashram of the sage Gautama and undertook a *tapas* on the Arunachala hill, Siva appeared before her in the form of Ardhanariswara to imply that he had given Parvati equal importance. Hence the Ardhanariswara image behind the Sivalingam in the Pavazhakkunru temple.

Anybody could guess the ordeal that

★ **IN DEEP THOUGHT:**
There were Mahatma Gandhi's portraits on the wall behind Ramana's couch, signalling the Maharshi's keen interest in India's freedom struggle.

- PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

the Swamy had subjected himself to when he stayed in the airless, cramped cavern. He would be absorbed in the Self. Today, a picture of the Maharshi with his mother is displayed in the rock shelter.

The Pavazhakkunru temple offers a dramatic view of the town below including the expansive Arunachaleswara temple. From outside the Pavazhakkunru temple compound, there are spectacular views of the hill's several spurs and its valleys. On the day of our visit, it had rained early in the morning and the vegetation on the spur was glistening. Chandramouli pointed to the spurs with nostalgia. "I joined the ashram in 1991. If it rained hard in those years, water would flow in the

• ARUNAGIRINATHAR:

The front *mantapa* of Arunagirinathar temple, opposite to the Ayyankulam tank, where the Brahmana Swamy and Palaniswami stayed for a few months.

- PHOTO:

S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



canal coursing through the ashram premises," he says. "We used to swim in the canal. Besides, many waterfalls would form overnight in the spurs. It was an enchanting sight. Thousands of people from the town would climb the spurs and bathe to their hearts' content in the waterfalls. Water used to flow for a week."

The meeting and after

Azhaganumal and Nagaswami arrived at the Pavazhakkunru temple in

December 1898. Kannan described the scene, "The Brahmana Swamy was lying on his back on a small rock. He was a picture of *ekantham*." But his mother and elder brother were shocked to see that he looked skinny and emaciated, that he was dressed only in a *koupinam*, sported matted hair and long nails.

For several days, the mother constantly begged Venkataraman to return home. She pleaded with him. Then she burst into tears. "The young Swamy could bear it no longer; he got up and went away," Narasimha Swamy says in his book. On another day, villagers had gathered there and Azhagammal requested them to intercede on her behalf. But the Swamy sat there unmoved. He did not speak at all. The mother, Nagaswami and the people around, asked the Swamy to give a definitive reply. One among them, Pachaiyappa Mudaliar, proffered a pencil and a sheet of paper. The Swamy wrote in Tamil, and translated into English, it reads: "The Ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their past deeds - their *prarabhdha karma*. Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, however hard you may try. What is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to stop it. This is certain. The best course, therefore, is for one to be silent." The Swamy was all of 18 when he wrote these words. This was his first *upadesa*, given in writing, to his mother. The *upadesa*, in both Tamil and in its English translation, are displayed boldly at the Pavazhakkunru temple. Sri Ramanasramam has renovated the temple and it was consecrated on November 7, 2016. Narasimha Swami writes with words, full of pathos, "With a heavy heart, Azhagammal remarked: 'Is it for this we came?'" With her first son, she descended the hill and left for Manamadurai.

The Swamy stayed at Pavazhakkunru till 1899. Disturbed by the never-ending throng of people here as well, the 20-year-old Swamy moved with Palaniswami to the Virupaksha cave. The young sadhu's stay at the Virupaksha cave for 17 years, from 1899 to 1916 was marked with momentous events.



“Who am I?”

Firstly, it was here that he revealed his central teaching “Who am I?” to Sivaprakasam Pillai in 1902. The Swamy gave his replies in writing in Tamil to 13 questions from Sivaprakasam Pillai bearing on “Who am I?”, the nature of awareness, the path of inquiry for understanding the nature of mind and so on. As Sivaprakasam kept firing questions at him, the Swamy wrote out the answers rapidly on a slate or paper. The replies were expanded to 28 questions later. The 23-year-old Swamy’s replies shook the spiritual world. Serious-minded devotees engaged in Self-realisation and Self-enquiry started coming to him in large numbers. His enunciation of “Who am I?” brought him world attention.

Earlier, it was at the Virupaksha cave in 1900 that he expanded on his enlightenment to Gambhiram Sesha Iyer. The latter had many sheaves of paper on which the Swamy had written his replies to the questions he had posed, in 1900, 1901 and 1902. The replies included the description of the death experience he had in July 1896 at Madurai. They were later published as *Vichara Sangraha* (*The Self-enquiry*).

As Chandramouli noted, the replies relating to “Who am I?”, the *Vichara Sangraha* and *Ulladhu Narpadhu* (*Forty Verses on Reality*) constituted the core essence of the Maharshi’s teachings. *Ulladhu Narpadhu* is indeed his seminal composition.

Secondly, the Swamy gave his first oral *upadesa* on the nature of *tapas* to the great scholar, Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni at the Virupaksha in 1907. He thus broke

his 11 years of silence - he occasionally spoke to Palaniswami. Ganapati Muni had earlier met the Swamy in 1903 and 1904. Both, of the same age, hit it off. The Swamy deeply admired Ganapati’s immense scholarship of the Vedas and the Upanishads, Sanskrit literature and his ability to compose poems in Sanskrit and Telugu at will.

Thirdly, when the Swamy explained the nature of *tapas* to Ganapati Muni, the latter was so satisfied with it that he was in ecstasy. He clutched the Swamy’s feet. He asked a devotee present there what the name of the sadhu was. “Venkataraman,” came the reply. A.R. Natarajan says in his *Timeless in Time* that Ganapati Muni shortened it to Ramana. Since the Swamy, in the Muni’s estimate, was a Jagath Guru, he called him “Maharshi” (the great sage). Since the Swamy was endowed with godly

• **THE FIRST UPADESA:**
(Top) The Pavazhakkunru Siva temple, where the Brahmana Swamy refused in December 1898 to go back to Madurai with his mother, Azhagammal and gave her his first written *upadesa* in Tamil.

- PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

(Bottom): **BEDROCK:**
As the name implies, the Pavazhakkunru temple is built on a low-slung bedrock on the Arunachala hill.

- PHOTO: T.S. SUBRAMANIAN



The first instruction imparted by Sri Ramana Maharshi was to his Mother here [Pavala kundru] in 1898:

The Ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their past deeds. Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try how hard you may. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to stop it. This is certain. The best course, therefore, is for one to be silent.

Mother Pervati did penance in this pavala kundru [coral rock] and was absorbed in to Arunachaleswara. Goutama Maharshi, Bhagavan Ramana and many others also sanctified this place.

Lord : Pavagiriswarar, Ardhanareshwarar,
Mother : Muttambikai.

Pavala Kundru temple renovated
and kundhabhishekam performed on
7th NOV. 2016
by Sri Ramanasramam

ஸ்ரீராமண மகரிஷிகள் தனது முகம் உபதேசத்தை
செய்தன அறகம்மையாருக்கு பவலக் குன்றில்
1898-ஆம் ஆண்டில் அருளினார் :

அவ்வாறு பிரார்த்திப்ப பிரகாரம்
அதற்காவாய்வு ஆங்காங்கிருந்து
ஆட்டுவிப்பவர். எவ்வுருவம் நடவாது
என் முயற்சிக்கிறும் நடவாது; நடப்பது
என்கடை செய்விரும் ரிஸ்ஸாது. இதுவே திண்மை.
ஆதலின், மௌனமாய் இருக்கை நன்று.



செய்தன பார்வதி தவம் புரிந்து அருணாசலசுரூபன்
ஐக்கியமானதும் கௌதமர், பகவாய் நாமதர் மற்றும் பல
மகரிஷிகளும் வசித்த புனிதமான இடம் பவலக்குன்று.

இறைவன் : பவலகிரிஸ்வரர், அர்த்தநாரிஸ்வரர்.
இறைவி : முத்தாம்பிகை.

பவலக்குன்று ஆயுத புராணப்படி மற்றும்
குடமுருக்கு விழா 7-11-2016 அன்று
ஸ்ரீராமணசுரம் நிர்வாகத்தால் செங்கிப்பட்டு.

LITHIC RECORDS:
(left and right) The stone plaques in English and Tamil, installed in the Pavazhakkunru temple, containing the first *upadesa* given by Sri Ramana Maharshi to his mother in 1898.

PHOTOS:
T.S. SUBRAMANIAN

qualities, he also called him Bhagavan. Ganapati Muni declared that people, including his own disciples should address the Swamy as "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi" thenceforth. From the age of 28 when the Swamy received this title, his devotees everywhere call him "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi" or simply Bhagavan. Fourthly, Azhagammal came to live permanently with the Maharshi in the Virupaksha cave.

At Virupaksha cave

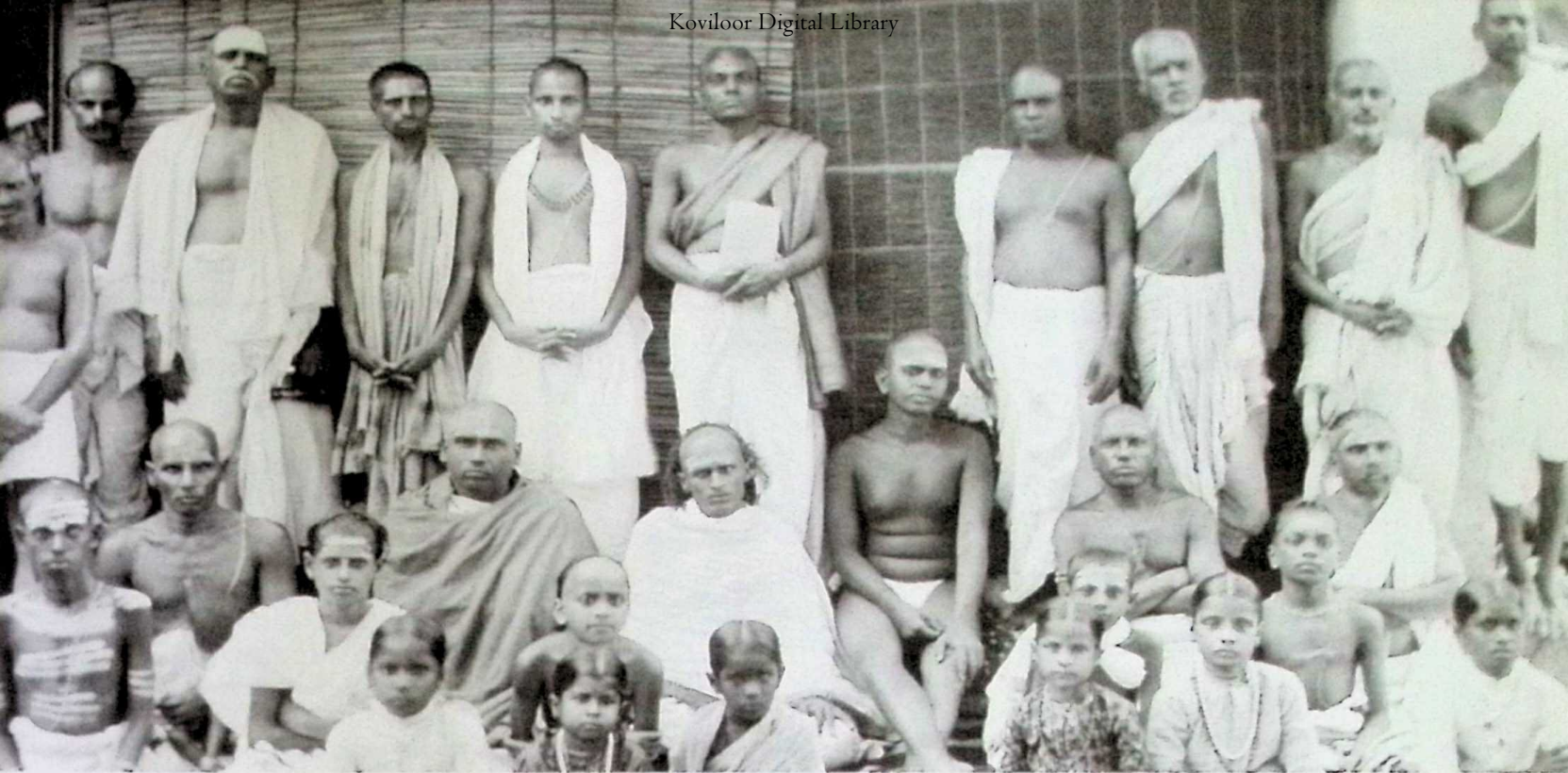
Fifthly, it was in circa 1900 CE, when the Swamy was 21-years-old, that a devotee named Nalla Pillai from Kumbakonam took the celebrated picture of him in the Virupaksha cave. The Maharshi explained in 1946 how it happened. He said: "It was 1900 or 1901. The Government brought a photographer to take pictures of some prisoners here. There were no photographers here then. This photographer was a disciple of Kumbakonam Mauna Swamy and had, it seems, heard of me. So he took advantage of the trip to visit me here. He gave us his photo of Kumbakonam Mauna Swamy and took my photo...." (From *Day by Day with Bhagavan* by A. Devaraja Mudaliar). Osborne describes it thus, "It is the face of a beautiful youth, almost a child, yet with the strength and profundity of the Bhagavan."

Sixth, Ramana did enormous reading of religious books during his stay at the Virupaksha cave, acquired scholarship in

spiritual matters and became proficient in Telugu, Malayalam and Sanskrit. Sometimes, he would visit the library in the ashram of Padmanabha Swamy (also called the Jata Swamy because he had matted hair, devoured the Sanskrit work called *Brihat Stotra Ratnakara* and other literature related to *ayurveda* and *mantra*). He read the books brought by Palaniswami from libraries, and other books gifted to him by devotees. After the Swamy had broken his silence by giving the verbal *upadesa* on the nature of *tapas* to Ganapati Muni, a perennial stream of devotees came to him every day with their questions on spiritual matters and sought explanations from him. His fame spread everywhere.

In 1914, mother Azhagammal came to live with the Maharshi at the Virupaksha cave. She was facing straitened personal circumstances. Her eldest son Nagaswami had died sometime after 1900. Her third son Nagasundaram was married but had no children.

Azhagammal was anxious that the family lineage should continue. She, therefore, entreated Ramana to bless Nagasundaram that a child be born to him. Some months later, a son was born to Nagasundaram and the child was named T. N. Venkataraman. But tragedy struck. Mrs. Nagasundaram died sometime later. Bhagavan's younger sister Alamelu and her husband brought up Venkataraman. Nagasundaram turned into Swami Niranjanananda



and later became the *sarvadhikari* - the chief administrator - of the ashram. He was born in 1897 and was absorbed in Arunachala on January 29, 1953. His son, Venkataraman became Swami Ramanananda and later became the president of the ashram. Born in 1914, he was absorbed in Arunachala on December 26, 2007. Their *samadhis* exist adjacent to the room where the Maharshi attained *mahanirvana* on April 14, 1950.

Azhagammal was stricken with typhoid in 1914 when she stayed at the Virupaksha cave. Ramana tended to her but the fever did not come down. So he composed four verses in Tamil in praise of Arunachala for his mother's recovery. The fever subsided and his mother was back on her feet. She later went back to Manamadurai. Earlier, in 1905, Ramana and a few of his followers moved to the Pachaiyamman temple in a suburb of Tiruvannamalai, during the plague epidemic. The entire town became empty. Ramana stayed at the temple for six months. He humourously recalled an incident, "When I was at Pachaiyamman Koil, I had a small towel which was tattered and torn, almost to rags, with threads having come out in most places. Once a cowherd boy made fun of this torn rag, by telling me, 'The Governor wants this towel.' I replied, 'Tell him I won't give it to him!...' Again, Ramana stayed with Ganapati Muni and others at the Pachaiyamman temple from January to March 1908. Later, they



returned to the Virupaksha cave. In 1916, Azhagammal returned to the Virupaksha cave with Nagasundaram and his child. She told Bhagavan "I have nowhere to go. So I have come here." But some of his disciples who were staying with the Maharshi there, objected to her staying in the cave.

Another group had no objections. Arguments broke out between the two groups. Bhagavan, who was watching all these, got up and told his mother, "Let us go away from here." The arguments stopped and Azhagammal stayed with Ramana.

• (Top): Sri Ramana Maharshi, along with Gambhiram Seshayya (wearing a shawl) and Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni (on Seshayya's left), and Vedic scholars.

- PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM

(Below): The Pachaiyamman temple, where Ramana stayed in 1905 when plague struck the Tiruvannamalai town, and in 1908.

- PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

WHO AM I ?



LIFE STORY

Towards the Infinite

The creation of the Skandasramam offered devotees a space to imbibe the spiritual philosophy of Sri Ramana Maharshi

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪



Skandasramam, about 100 metres above the Virupaksha cave, was the place where Ramana, his mother and a group of core disciples moved next. Since the Virupaksha cave was not spacious enough and scores of devotees flocked to meet him every day, Skandasramam was specifically built to accommodate more people. Ramana named it Skandasramam because Kandaswamy, one of his earliest devotees, planned and built it singlehandedly. It was a labour of love for Kandaswamy, who inspected various places on the hill and zeroed in on this location. He started clearing a thick forest of prickly pear on the mountain slope. This is the tribute from Ramana to Kandaswamy: "You cannot imagine the state the site

was originally in. Kandaswamy almost worked with superhuman effort and achieved by his own hands what even four people together could not have done. He removed all the prickly pear, reduced stones and boulders to level ground, created a garden and raised the asramam."

At Skandasramam

With no food available in the vicinity of Skandasramam, Azhagammal decided to cook food for the devotees. She did it herself, with the help of several other staunch women devotees of Ramana, such as Echammal, "keerai" Patti, Ratnammal, Mudaliar Patti, Desurammal and others. Narasimha Swami says, "During the six years [1916-1922] that Azhagammal spent with her son here, she picked up (by keeping company with him and others visiting the ashram, by listening to his conversations and watching his conduct), all the important truths which Maharshi generally imparts to his devotees to enable them to attain salvation. She thus began to see things in a new light."

Kannan says, "Mother evolved spiritually and looked upon Bhagavan as a guru." From about 1919, she fell ill several times. "The Swamy attended on her constantly with remarkable devotion, often losing his sleep and comfort at night, right up to her end," Narasimha Swami observed.

May 1922, Azhagammal fell seriously

→ Skandasramam on the Arunachala hill.

→ PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM



ill. On May 19, 1922, her condition took a turn for the worse. Bhagavan spent eight hours with her. He did not have his meal but asked others to go ahead. People were chanting *Ramanama japama*, portions from the Vedas, *Tiruvvasagam* and so on. Bhagavan's right hand was on her chest, and the left on her head. Azhagammal attained *vimukti* at 8 p.m. on May 19, 1922. Bhagavan got up and said, "There is no *theettu*. Mother has attained *vimukti*. We can eat now." He also said his mother had taken several births earlier, she had no desires in all her births and that she had melted into *prana hridayam*. She would have no rebirth. She had attained *moksha*, that is, the supreme peace of liberation from which there is no return to ignorance, the Maharshi added.

Honouring the mother

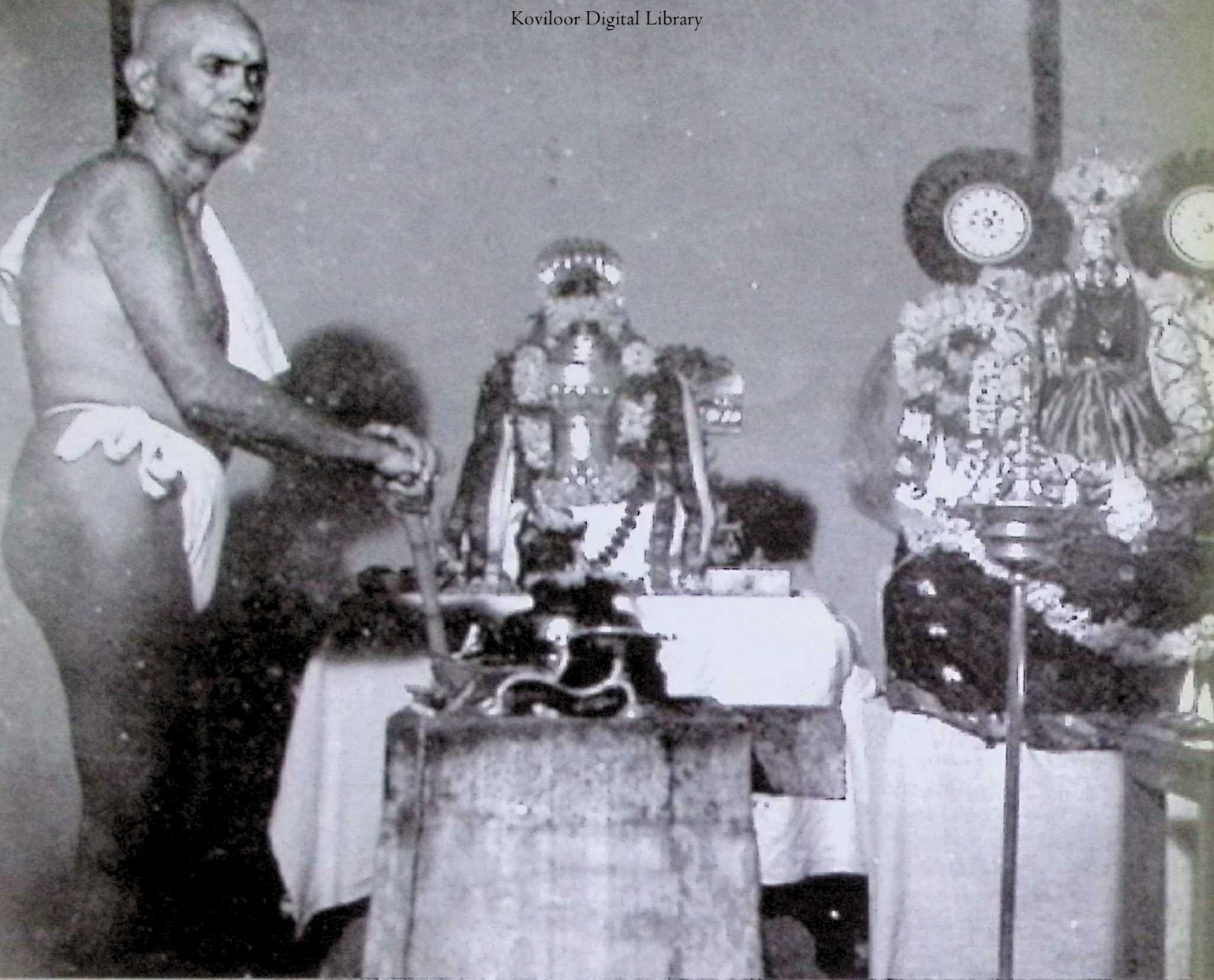
People were against cremating Azhagammal. From Skandasramam on the hill, they brought her body down. They rested it under Aswatha, a sacred fig tree. A pit was dug at a spot near a tank called Pali Theertham. Perumal Swami and other disciples of Bhagavan reverentially placed the mother's body in it. Sacred ash (*vibhuti*), camphor, incense and salt were kept around her body before the pit was filled up with soil. Bhagavan stood silently, without participating. Many hundreds of people from the town reached there to honour the mother of an outstanding spiritual teacher. A sacred Sivalingam brought from Varanasi was installed on a masonry platform built over her *samadhi*. A small shrine first came up with the Sivalingam inside. It was called Matrubhuteswarar shrine. There were pujas every day for 48 days. Niranjanananda Swami started living near his mother's *samadhi* in a thatched hut. For six months, every day, the Maharshi would come down from Skandasramam on the hill, spend a few hours near his mother's *samadhi* and climb back to Skandasramam. One day when he had gone for a walk, he felt a powerful impulse to go down to his mother's *samadhi* and remain there. When he did not return to Skandasramam for several hours,



worried devotees came down and saw him sitting near the *samadhi*. He declined to go back to Skandasramam. He told them that the divine force that brought him from Madurai to Tiruvannamalai had detained him near his mother's *samadhi*. He attributed it to "divine will". From December 1922 onwards, the Maharshi made it his permanent abode. Only a few people remained at Skandasramam. The present-day Sri Ramanasramam began to develop with Azhagammal's *samadhi* as the nucleus. The ashram started burgeoning from 1922. In 1912, Ramana had the second death experience near Aamai Parai or the Tortoise Rock when he went for a walk on the hill with one of his devotees named Vasudeva Sastri. In his book *Timeless in Time*, A.R. Natarajan estimates that the Maharshi's second death experience "is most significant for understanding the natural state of Ramana since his enlightenment and his uninterrupted awareness of the "I" in the heart." Natarajan adds, "His respiration had stopped, his body had

★ **REUNION:**
Sri Ramana Maharshi
with his mother at
Skandasramam.

— PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM



• **INTENSE INVOLVEMENT:** Sri Ramana Maharshi in the sanctum of the Matrubhuteswarar temple built over the *samadhi* of his mother, Azhagamal. He was intensely involved in the temple construction and installation of Sri Chakra there.

• PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM

become cold, death slowly crept on his body. This happened for about 10 or 15 minutes. While narrating this incident, Ramana said, "Yet my usual current was continuing, without a break in that state also."

In front of the Matrubhuteswarar shrine built to honour the memory of Ramana's mother, the ashram erected a hall. Ramana stayed in that hall and his core disciples also stayed there. He used to sit on a couch there. He would be silent most of the time.

A number of visitors would ask him questions on the Advaitic principle of non-duality, the nature of Reality, the method to be adopted for Self-realisation or Self-enquiry and so on.

The Maharshi would mostly answer them in writing. There would be recitation of *slokas* and chanting of Vedas in his presence. "You can discuss anything with the Bhagavan," Ganesan tells this writer. Often, he would repartee with lightning speed. A lawyer once asked Ramana why he had reservations

accepting money while he accepted food and fruits. Ramana replied, "You cannot eat money!"

Kannan says, "After his second death experience, he started giving replies orally. He would give replies to genuine questions. He would not reply when argumentative questions were asked. He would be silent most of the time, looking serene." Devotees would come even around 2 a.m. to have his *darshan*. But his instruction to the ashram staff was that they should not be stopped from meeting him. Sometimes, he would joke about it. "They have come all the way see this *kovanandi* (a fakir who wears only a loin cloth)." Bhagavan stayed for 24 years in this Old Hall, which had been built anew. From here, he could look at the hill. It is now a Meditation Hall. There is a picture of Ramana on the cot on which he used to sit or sleep.

Ashram routine

Ramana Maharshi had a set routine in the ashram, getting up around 3 or 3.30

a.m, finishing his morning ablutions, taking a bath, going to the kitchen for cutting vegetables, having breakfast at 7 a.m. with the devotees in the dining hall and so on. After breakfast, he would return to the hall and read the newspapers. A large number of devotees would have gathered by then. He would answer their questions or clarify their doubts on spiritual issues. He would then go for a walk on the Arunachala hill. After lunch, he would go with a couple of his faithful disciples for another walk on hill. Again, he would go for a walk on the hill in the evening.

In fact, the free-roaming spirit in Ramana felt chained by the ashram regimen. He even called it "a jail", and jokingly called his attendants "warders". He tried to escape from the ashram a couple of times.

A devotee sculpted a settee from stone, called "kal sofa", and was adamant that Ramana should use it. He

sat and slept on it for six months.

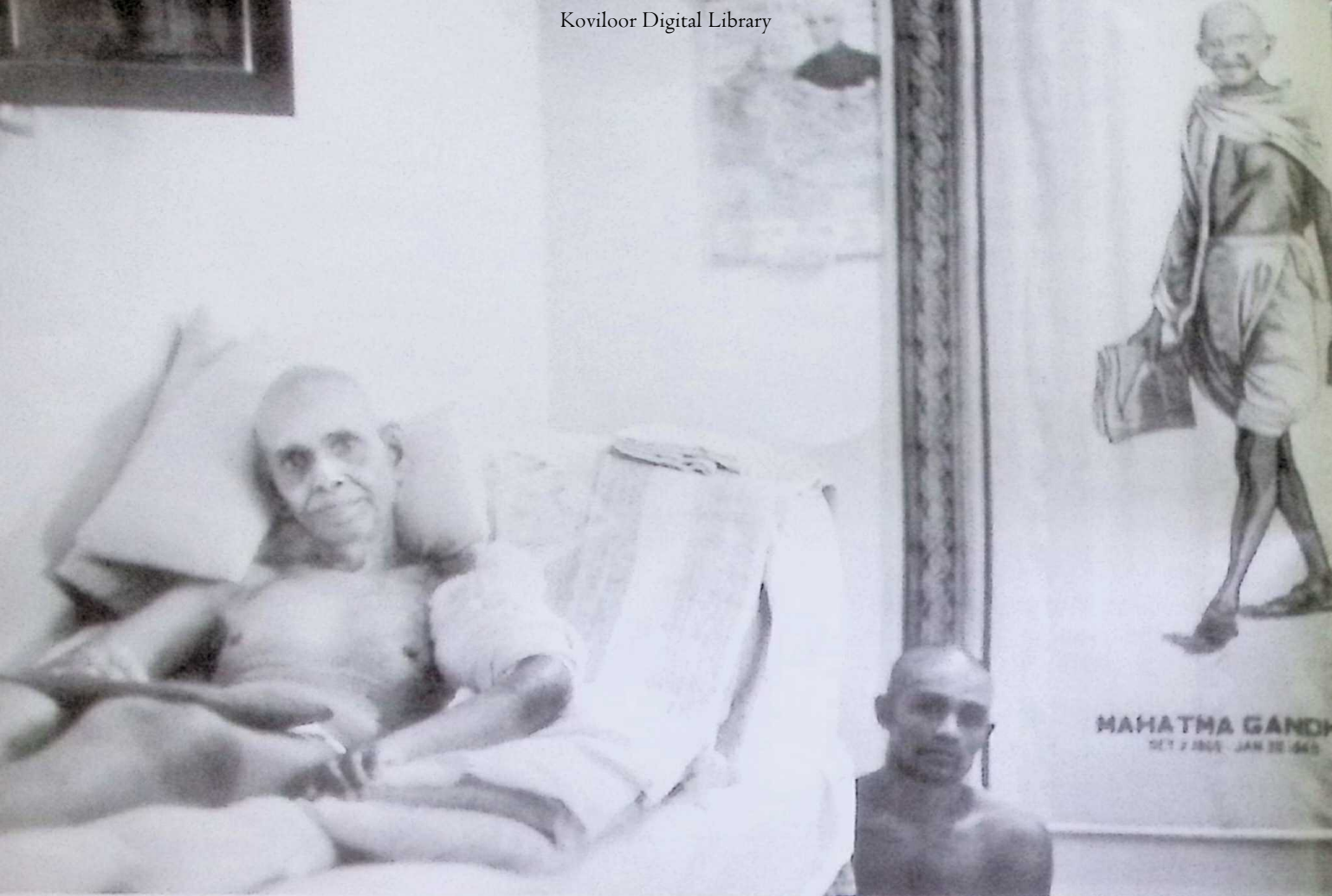
The shrine for Azhagammal metamorphosed into a beautiful temple between 1939 and 1949. Bhagavan took a personal interest in its construction, going into every detail. It took ten years to build the Matrubhuteswarar temple because the Bhagavan was against soliciting donations. Only voluntary donations continue to be accepted. "That is the guiding spirit of the ashram to this day," Kannan emphasised.

On March 17, 1949, the *kumbhabhishekam* (the consecration ceremony) of the newly-built Matrubhuteswarar temple to honour Ramana's mother took place. The architect, Vaidyanatha Sthapathi, designed the temple. The Sankaracharya of Puri performed the *kumbhabhishekam*. Before the consecration, Ramana blessed the Sri Chakra installed in the temple. To this day, the Sri Chakra puja is performed

★ **THE MAHARSHI'S SAMADHI:** The Ramaneswara Mahalingam temple, with its Sivalingam and a bust of Sri Ramana Maharshi behind it, built over his *samadhi* on the ashram premises after he attained *mahanirvana* on April 14, 1950.

PHOTO: S R RAGHUNATHAN





• **INTERESTED IN FREEDOM MOVEMENT:** Sri Ramana Maharshi, after the fourth surgery to treat a malignant tumour on his left arm in 1950. As the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi behind him suggests, Ramana was interested in the freedom struggle.

• PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM

every Friday, on the full moon days and the first day of the months in the Tamil calendar.

Merging with the Infinite

Towards the end of 1948, a cancerous growth was seen on the Maharshi's left arm. He wanted the tumour to take its course. Indeed, he used to joke that "a lingam has sprouted" on his arm. However, doctors insisted that it should be operated. Doctors from Madras (now Chennai) came to the ashram and performed the surgery. He stayed in a small room near the Matrubhuteswarar temple. Although four surgeries were done to tackle the sarcoma, he insisted that devotees be allowed to see him. He would sit in an easy chair outside his room and devotees would pass by, a few receiving clarifications from him on spiritual issues. Often, he would look longingly at the Arunachala hill. The fourth surgery was performed on him on February 4, 1950. But his condition worsened. On April 14, 1950, he was in a precarious condition. There was gloom on the ashram premises. About 1,500 people attended the evening *darshan*. At 8.47 p.m., the Bhagavan attained *siddhi*.

S.S. Cohen, a long-time devotee

of Ramana and an ashram resident, described what happened: "At 7 p.m., oxygen was administered to him for a few minutes, but, seeing [that] it gave him no relief, he feebly asked that it should be stopped. The situation was tense: about 500 devotees were outside in sad expectation of the solemn last moment. Devotees, ashram workers, and a few long-time disciples went in by turn to have a last glimpse of him. When the end was known to be approaching, the whole congregation in one voice took to chanting the Tamil hymns he had composed in praise of Lord Arunachala: "Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva, Arunachala", till it came at 8.47." (From the Epilogue written by Cohen to Narasimha Swami's book, *Self-realisation*.)

The formless sage of Arunachala had merged with the Infinite. Ganesan, who was about 14 years old at that time, was standing near the entrance to the room where the Maharshi was lying. Ganesan has gone on record that when Sri Ramana attained *mahanirvana*, he saw a brilliant flash of light, which later moved towards the top of the holy hill, Arunachala. A glowing meteor with a luminous tail made its appearance in the south and moved

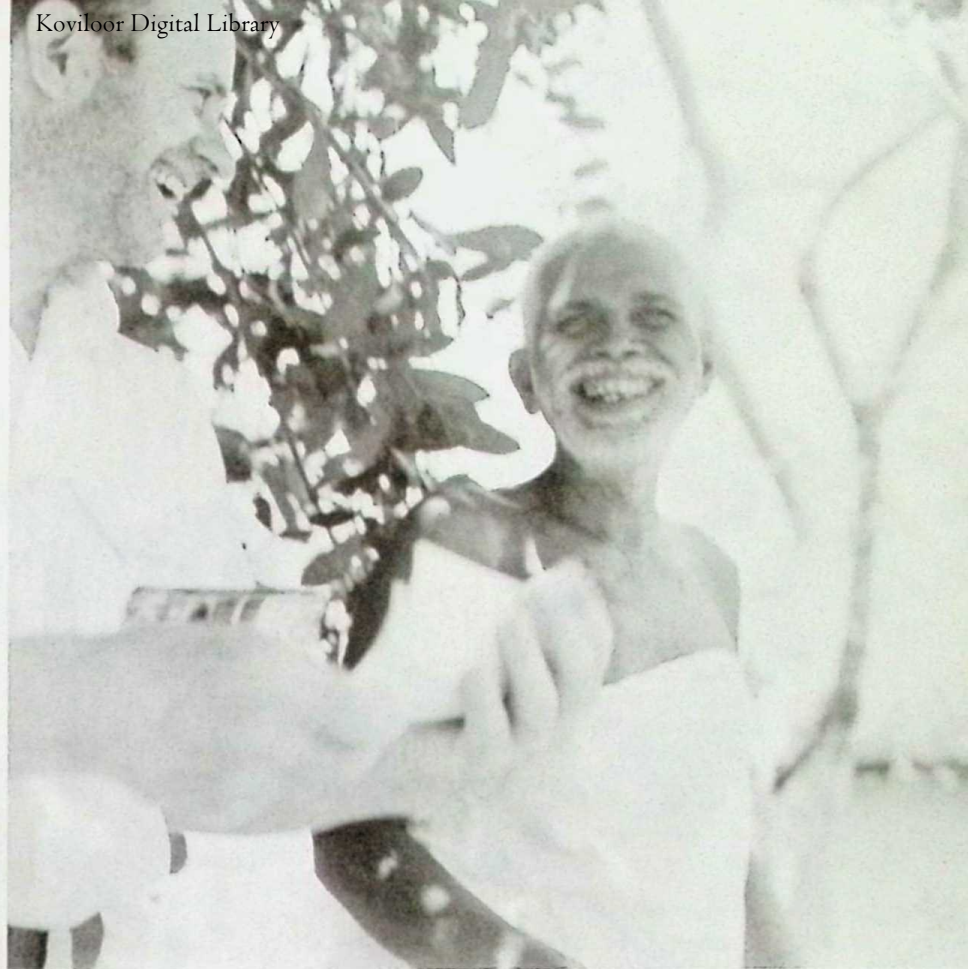
slowly across to the north.

Thousands of people across what was then called Madras State, saw the meteor slowly travelling from the south on the horizon.

Sri Ramana Maharshi's body was buried at a spot near the temple built for his mother. A Sivalingam was installed over his *samadhi*. It is now a temple called Ramaneswara Mahalingam. Several hundreds of devotees of the Maharshi come there every day. They have *darshan* of the Sivalingam and meditate in the spacious hall in front of it to receive Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi's grace.

• A moment of mirth (*Top*): Guy Hague, an American engineer, with Sri Ramana Maharshi. (*Bottom*) For a few years, the Maharshi chewed betel leaves for digestion but gave up the habit.

- PHOTOS: SRI RAMANASRAMAM





Milestones in

December 30, Monday, corresponding to 16, Margazhi of Tamil year Pramadi, Star Punarvasu, Arudra Darshan Day: Born at 1 a.m. at Tiruchuzhi (Sri Sundara Mandiram)

1879



Moves to Dindigul, after completing elementary education at Tiruchuzhi

1891

February 18: Death of father, Sundaram Iyer. Moves to Madurai. Studies at Scott's Middle School and American Mission High School

1892

1895

November: Arunachala is mentioned to him by an elderly relative



1896

About middle of July: Death Experience at Madurai ending in complete and permanent Realisation of the Self at what is today called Sri Ramana Mandiram. **August 29, Saturday:** Leaves Madurai for Arunachala. **September 1, Tuesday:** Arrives in Arunachala. Stays in the temple premises within the thousand-pillared hall, beneath the *iluppai* tree, in the Patala Linga (vault), and sometimes in the *gopurams*

1897

Moves to Gurumurtham in the outskirts of the town (early in 1897). Stays (a year-and-a-half) in the shrine and in the adjoining mango grove

1898

1898, May: Uncle Nelliappa Iyer visits Bhagavan at mango grove. **September:** Moves to Pavazhakkunru. **December:** Mother Azhagammal with her eldest son Nagaswami visits Bhagavan at Pavazhakkunru

1899

February: Moves to Arunachala Hill; stays in various caves up the Hill but mostly in Virupaksha cave, using Mango Tree Cave as summer residence

Replies to questions put by Gambhiram Seshayya at Virupaksha cave (published as Self-enquiry in 1902)

1900



Moves to Pachaiyamman Koil for six months during the plague epidemic. Returns to the hill

1902

Answers questions asked by Sivaprakasam Pillai (Published as *Who am I?* in 1923)



1905

1907

November 18: Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni (who first visited Bhagavan in 1903 and 1904) revisits, and Bhagavan imparts *upadesa* to him

1908

January to March: Stays at Pachaiyamman Koil (with Ganapati Muni and others) and again goes back to Virupaksha cave. Translates into Tamil prose Adi Sankara's *Vivekachudamani* and *Drik Drisya Viveka*

1911

November: F.H. Humphreys, the first Westerner, meets Bhagavan

1912

Second death experience at Tortoise Rock in the presence of Vasudeva Sastry and others

1914

Offers prayers / song to Arunachala for mother's recovery from illness



Bhagavan's life

Writes also the following during the Virupaksha days; *The Song of the Appalam* (Pappadam), *Arunachala Aksharamanamalai*, *Arunachala Padikam*, *Arunachala Ashtakam*. Translates Devikalottara and Adi Sankara's *Dakshinamurti Stotra*, *Guru Stuti* and *Hastamalaka Stotra*

1915



1916

Moves to Skandashramam

Composes *Arunachala Pancharatnam* in Sanskrit, Mother settles at Skandashramam. *Sri Ramana Gita* in Sanskrit written by Ganapati Muni

1917



1922

May 19, Friday: Mother's *mahasamadhi*. Middle of December: Moves to the present site of Sri Ramanasramam



Composes *Upadesa Saram/Undiyar* (The Essence of Instruction) in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit and Malayalam. April 24: Composes the Tamil song *Atma-Vidya* (Self-Knowledge)

1927

1928

Composes *Ulladu Narpadu* (Forty Verses on Reality) in Tamil and in Malayalam (Sat Darshanam)

Sat Dharshanam in Sanskrit (translated from Tamil by Ganapati Muni)

1930



1933

Translates into Tamil the *Agama Sarvajnanotharam-Atma Sakshatkara Prakaranam*

Translates into Malayalam Ganapati Muni's *Sri Ramana Gita*

1936



1939

September 1, Thursday: Bhagavan lays the foundation for the Matrubhuteswara temple



1940

Selects 42 verses from *The Bhagavad Gita* (now entitled *The Song Celestial*) and translates them into Tamil and Malayalam

1946

1946: September 1: Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Bhagavan's arrival in Arunachala. Construction of the New Hall in front of the Matrubhuteswara Temple

February: Composes *Ekatma Panchakam* (Five Verses on the Self) in Telugu and Tamil

1947

1948

June 18: Cow Lakshmi attains *nirvana* (Liberation). Translates into Tamil *Atma Bodha* of Adi Sankara



March 17, Thursday: *Kumbhabhishekam* of the Matrubhuteswarar temple in the presence of Bhagavan

1949

April 14, Friday: *Brahma Nirvana* of Bhagavan at 8.47 p.m. At that moment a shooting star, vividly luminous, coming from the South and moving slowly northward across the sky, was observed by many in different parts of the country

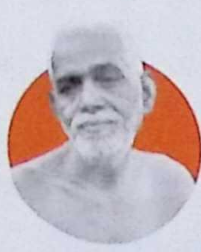
1950



Introduction

Who am I? is the title given to a set of questions and answers bearing on Self-enquiry. The questions were put to Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi by Sri M. Sivaprakasam Pillai, about the year 1902. Sri Pillai, a graduate in Philosophy, was at the time employed in the Revenue Department of the South Arcot Collectorate. During his visit to Tiruvannamalai in 1902 on official work, he went to Virupaksha Cave on Arunachala Hill and met the Maharshi there. He sought from him spiritual guidance and solicited answers to questions relating to Self-enquiry. As Bhagavan was not talking then, not because of any vow he had taken but because he did not have the inclination to talk, he answered questions put to him by writing. As recollected and recorded by Sri Sivaprakasam Pillai, there were thirteen questions and answers to them given by Bhagavan. This record was first published by Sri Pillai in 1923 (in the original Tamil), along with a couple of poems composed by himself relating how Bhagavan's grace operated in his case by dispelling his doubts and by saving him from a crisis in life.

- Excerpts from the
Introduction by T.M.P.
Mahadevan
University of Madras
June 30, 1982
Eleventh Edition, 2018.



Who am I?

*The Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi
in the form of 28 questions and answers*

Who Am I? - Nan Yar

All living beings desire to be happy always, without any misery. In everyone there is observed supreme love for oneself. And happiness alone is the cause of love. In order, therefore, to gain that happiness which is one's nature and which is experienced in the state of deep sleep, where there is no mind, one should know oneself. To achieve this, the Path of Knowledge, the enquiry in the form of *Who am I?*, is the principal means.

1. Who am I?

The gross body which is composed of the seven humours (*dhatus*), I am not; the five cognitive sense organs, viz., the senses of hearing, touch, sight, taste and smell, which apprehend their respective objects, viz. sound, touch, colour, taste and odour, I am not; the five cognitive sense organs, viz., the organs of speech, locomotion, grasping, excretion and procreation, which have as their respective functions, speaking, moving, grasping, excreting and enjoying, I am not; the five vital airs, *prana*, etc., which perform respectively the five functions of in-breathing, etc., I am not; even the mind which thinks, I am not; nescience too, which is

endowed only with the residual impressions of objects and in which there are no objects and no functionings, I am not.

2. If I am none of these, then who am I?

After negating all of the above mentioned as 'not this', 'not this', that Awareness which alone remains - that I am.

3. What is the nature of Awareness?

The nature of Awareness is Existence-Consciousness-Bliss.

4. When will the realisation of the Self be gained?

When the world which is what-is-seen has been removed, there will be realisation of the Self which is the seer.

5. Will there not be realisation of the Self even while the world is there (taken as real)?
There will not be.**6. Why?**

The seer and the object seen are like the rope and the snake. Just as the knowledge of the rope which is the substratum will not arise unless the false knowledge of the illusory serpent goes, so the realisation of the Self which is the substratum will not be gained unless the belief that the world is real is removed.

7. When will the world which is the object seen be removed?

When the mind, which is the cause of all cognition and of all actions, becomes quiescent, the world will disappear.

8. What is the nature of the mind?

What is called 'mind' is a wondrous power residing in the Self. It causes all thoughts to arise. Apart from thoughts, there is no such thing as mind. Therefore, thought is the nature of mind. Apart from thoughts, there is no independent entity called the world.

In deep sleep there are no thoughts, and there is no world. In the states of waking and dream, there are thoughts, and there is a world also.

Just as the spider emits the thread (of the web) out of itself and again withdraws it into itself, likewise the mind projects the world out of itself and again resolves it into itself. When the mind comes out of the Self, the world appears.

Therefore, when the world appears (to be real), the Self does not appear; and when the Self appears (shines) the world does not appear. When one persistently inquires into the nature of the mind, the mind will end leaving the Self (as the residue). What is referred to as the Self is the *Atman*. The mind always exists only in dependence on something gross; it cannot stay alone. It is the mind that is called the subtle body or the soul (*jiva*).

9. What is the path of inquiry for understanding the nature of the mind?

That which rises as 'I' in this body is the mind. If one inquires as to where in the body the thought 'I' rises first, one would discover that it rises in the heart. That is the place of the mind's origin. Even if one thinks constantly 'I-I', one will be led to that place. Of all the thoughts that arise in the mind, the 'I'-thought is the first. It is only after the rise of this that the other thoughts arise. It is after the appearance of the first personal pronoun that the second and third personal pronouns appear; without the first personal pronoun there will not be the second and third.

10. How will the mind become quiescent?

By the inquiry 'Who am I?'. The thought 'Who am I?' will destroy all other thoughts, and like the stick used for stirring the burning pyre, it will itself in the end get destroyed. Then, there will arise Self-realisation.

11. What is the means for constantly holding on to the thought 'Who am I?'

When other thoughts arise, one should not pursue them, but should inquire: 'To whom do they arise?' It does not matter how many thoughts arise. As each thought arises, one should inquire with diligence, 'To whom has this thought arisen?'. The answer that would emerge would be 'to me'.

'Who am I'?

நான் இது?

कोहं ?

ನಾನು ಯಾರು?

“मैं कौन हूं?”

Thereupon if one inquires 'Who am I?', the mind will go back to its source; and the thought that arose will become quiescent. With repeated practice in this manner, the mind will develop the skill to stay in its source. When the mind that is subtle goes out through the brain and the sense-organs, the gross names and forms appear; when it stays in the heart, the names and forms disappear. Not letting the mind go out, but retaining it in the Heart is what is called 'inwardness' (*antarmukha*). Letting the mind go out of the Heart is known as 'externalization' (*bahirmukha*). Thus, when the mind stays in the Heart, the 'I' which is the source of all thoughts will go, and the Self which

• "WHO AM I"? The seminal question raised by Sri Ramana Maharshi, written in his own hand in English, Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu and Hindi, displayed in the archives/museum at Sri Ramansramam.

• PHOTO:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

ever exists will shine. Whatever one does, one should do without the egoity 'I'. If one acts in that way, all will appear as of the nature of Siva (God).

12. Are there no other means for making the mind quiescent?

Other than inquiry, there are no adequate means. If through other means it is sought to control the mind, the mind will appear to be controlled, but will again go forth. Through the control of breath also, the mind will become quiescent; but it will be quiescent only so long as the breath remains controlled, and when the breath resumes the mind also will again start moving and will wander as impelled by residual impressions. The source is the same for both mind and breath. Thought, indeed, is the nature of the mind. The thought 'I' is the first thought of mind; and that is egoity. It is from that whence egoity originates that breath also originates. Therefore, when the mind becomes quiescent, the breath is controlled, and when the breath is controlled the mind becomes quiescent. But in deep sleep, although the mind becomes quiescent, the breath does not stop. This is because of the will of God, so that the body may be preserved and other people may not be under the impression that it is dead. In the state of waking and in *Samadhi*, when the mind becomes quiescent the breath is controlled. Breath is the

gross form of mind. Till the time of death, the mind keeps breath in the body; and when the body dies, the mind takes the breath along with it. Therefore, the exercise of breath control is only an aid for rendering the mind quiescent (*manonigraha*); it will not destroy the mind (*manonasa*). Like the practice of breath control, meditation on the forms of God, repetition of *mantras*, restriction on food, etc., are but aids for rendering the mind quiescent.

Through meditation on the forms of God and through repetition of *mantras*, the mind becomes one-pointed. The mind will always be wandering. Just as when a chain is given to an elephant to hold in its trunk it will go along grasping the chain and nothing else, so also when the mind is occupied with a name or form it will grasp that alone. When the mind expands in the form of countless thoughts, each thought becomes weak; but as thoughts get resolved the mind becomes one-pointed and strong; for such a mind Self-inquiry will become easy. Of all the restrictive rules, that relating to the taking of *sattvic* food in moderate quantities is the best; by observing this rule, the *sattvic* quality of mind will increase, and that will be helpful to Self-inquiry.

13. The residual impressions (thoughts) of objects appear unending like the waves

of an ocean. When will all of them get destroyed?

As the meditation on the Self rises higher and higher, the thoughts will get destroyed.

14. Is it possible for the residual impressions of objects that come from beginningless time, as it were, to be resolved, and for one to remain as the pure Self?

Without yielding to the doubt 'Is it possible, or not?', one should persistently hold on to the meditation on the Self. Even if one be a great sinner, one should not worry and weep 'O! I am a sinner, how can I be saved?' One should completely renounce the thought 'I am a sinner' and concentrate keenly on meditation on the Self; then, one would surely succeed. There are not two minds – one good and the other evil; the mind is only one. It is the residual impressions that are of two kinds – auspicious and inauspicious. When the mind is under influence of auspicious impressions it is called good; and when it is under the influence of inauspicious impressions it is regarded as evil. The mind should not be allowed to wander towards worldly objects and what concerns other people. However bad other people may be, one should bear no hatred for them. Both desire and hatred should be eschewed. All that one gives to others one gives to one's self. If this truth

is understood who will not give to others? When one's self arises all arises; when one's self becomes quiescent all becomes quiescent. To the extent we behave with humility, to that extent there will result good. If the mind is rendered quiescent, one may live anywhere.

15. How long should inquiry be practised?

As long as there are impressions of objects in the mind, so the inquiry 'Who am I?' is required. As thoughts arise they should be destroyed then and there in the very place of their origin, through inquiry. If one resorts to contemplation of the Self uninterruptedly, until the Self is gained, that alone would do. As long as there are enemies within the fortress, they will continue to sally forth; if they are destroyed as they emerge, the fortress will fall into our hands.

16. What is the nature of the Self?

What exists in truth is the Self alone. The world, the individual soul and God are appearances in it, like silver in mother-of-pearl; these three appear at the same time and disappear at the same time. The Self is that where there is absolutely no 'I' - thought. That is called 'Silence'. The Self itself is the world; the Self itself is 'I'; the Self itself is God; all is Siva, the Self.

17. Is not everything the work of God?

Without desire, resolve, or effort, the sun rises;

and in its mere presence, the sun-stone emits fire, the lotus blooms, water evaporates, people perform their various functions and then rest. Just as in the presence of the magnet the needle moves, it is by virtue of the mere presence of God that the souls governed by the three (cosmic) functions or the fivefold divine activity perform their actions and then rest, in accordance with their respective *karmas*. God has no resolve; no *karma* attaches itself to Him. That is like worldly actions not affecting the sun, or like the merits and demerits of the other four elements not affecting all-pervading space.

18. Of the devotees, who is the greatest?

He who gives himself up to the Self that is God is the most excellent devotee. Giving one's self up to God means remaining constantly in the Self without giving room for the rise of any thoughts other than that of the Self. Whatever burdens are thrown on God, He bears them. Since the supreme power of God makes all things move, why should we, without submitting ourselves to it constantly worry ourselves with thoughts as to what should be done and how, and what should not be done and how not? We know that the train carries all loads, so after getting on it why should we carry our small luggage on our head to our discomfort, instead of putting it down in the train and feeling at ease?

19. What is non-attachment?

As thoughts arise, destroying them utterly without any residue in the very place of their origin is non-attachment. Just as the pearl-diver ties a stone to his waist, sinks to the bottom of the sea and there takes the pearls, so each one of us should be endowed with non-attachment, dive within oneself and obtain the Self-Pearl.

20. Is it not possible for God and the Guru to effect the liberation of a soul?

God and the Guru will only show the way to liberation; they will not by themselves take the soul to the state of liberation. In truth, God and the Guru are not different. Just as the prey which has fallen into the jaws of a tiger has no escape, so those who have come within the ambit of the Guru's gracious look will be saved by the Guru and will not get lost; yet, each one should, by his own effort pursue the path shown by God or Guru and gain liberation. One can know oneself only with one's own eye of knowledge, and not with somebody else's. Does he who is Rama require the help of a mirror to know that he is Rama?

21. Is it necessary for one who longs for liberation to inquire into the nature of categories (*tattvas*)?

Just as one who wants to throw away garbage has no need to analyse

it and see what it is, so one who wants to know the Self has no need to count the number of categories or inquire into their characteristics; what he has to do is to reject altogether the categories that hide the Self. The world should be considered like a dream.

22. Is there no difference between waking and dream?
Waking is long and dream short; other than this there is no difference. Just as waking happenings seem real while awake, so do those in a dream while dreaming. In dream the mind takes on another body. In both waking and dream states thoughts, names and forms occur simultaneously.

23. Is it any use reading books for those who long for liberation?
All the texts say that in order to gain liberation one should render the mind quiescent; therefore their conclusive teaching is that the mind should be rendered quiescent; once this has been understood there is no need for endless reading. In order to quieten the mind one has only to inquire within oneself what one's Self is; how could this search be done in books? One should know one's Self with one's own eye of wisdom. The Self is within the five sheaths; but books are outside them. Since the Self has to be inquired into by discarding the five sheaths, it is futile to search for it in books. There will come a time

when one will have to forget all that one has learned.

24. What is happiness?
Happiness is the very nature of the Self; happiness and the Self are not different. There is no happiness in any object of the world. We imagine through our ignorance that we derive happiness from objects. When the mind goes out, it experiences misery. In truth, when its desires are fulfilled, it returns to its own place and enjoys the happiness that is the Self. Similarly, in the states of sleep, *Samadhi* and fainting, and when the object desired is obtained or the object disliked is removed, the mind becomes inward-turned, and enjoys pure Self-Happiness. Thus the mind moves without rest alternately going out of the Self and returning to it. Under the tree the shade is pleasant; out in the open the heat is scorching. A person who has been going about in the sun feels cool when he reaches the shade. Someone who keeps on going from the shade into the sun and then back into the shade is a fool. A wise man stays permanently in the shade. Similarly, the mind of the one who knows the truth does not leave Brahman. The mind of the ignorant, on the contrary, revolves in the world, feeling miserable, and for a little time returns to Brahman to experience happiness. In fact, what is called the world is only thought. When the

world disappears, i.e., when there is no thought, the mind experiences happiness; and when the world appears, it goes through misery.

25. What is wisdom-insight (*jnana drishti*)?
Remaining quiet is what is called wisdom-insight. To remain quiet is to resolve the mind in the Self. Telepathy, knowing past, present and future happenings and clairvoyance do not constitute wisdom-insight.

26. What is the relation between desirelessness and wisdom?
Desirelessness is wisdom. The two are not different; they are the same. Desirelessness is refraining from turning the mind towards any object. Wisdom means the appearance of no object. In other words, not seeking what is other than the Self is detachment or desirelessness; not leaving the Self is wisdom.

27. What is the difference between inquiry and meditation?
Inquiry consists in retaining the mind in the Self. Meditation consists in thinking that one's self is Brahman, Existence-Consciousness-Bliss.

28. What is liberation?
Inquiring into the nature of one's self that is in bondage, and realising one's true nature is liberation.

Courtesy:
Sri Ramanasramam,
Tiruvannamalai



• **CELEBRATED**

PICTURE: When the "Brahmana Swamy" was 21-years-old in 1900 CE and staying in the Virupaksha cave, Nalla Pillai, a photographer from Kumbakonam, took this picture.

- **PHOTO:**

SRI RAMANASRAMAM



Forty verses on Reality *Ulladu Narpadu*

By Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi
Translation and commentary by S.S. Cohen

• S.S. Cohen, an intellectual Jew, who stayed in the ashram for several years.

~ PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

Invocation

- i. Awareness is the nature of Reality.
- ii. Fear of death is the driving force behind the quest for immortality.

The text

1. Awareness is All - the seer and seen, the real and apparent.
2. The triad - God, soul and world - is the creation of the ego and disappears with the ego.
3. Speculations about God and world avail nothing: Self-realisation is the heart's cry of all.
4. Form and formlessness of God depend on the ego's conception of itself.
5. The world is the body inclusive of the five sheaths, for without them the world cannot be conceived (or perceived).
6. The world is what the mind conceives through the senses.

7. The world rises and sets with the knowledge of it. Both have their source in the Self.

8. Any sincere worship eventually leads to Realisation.

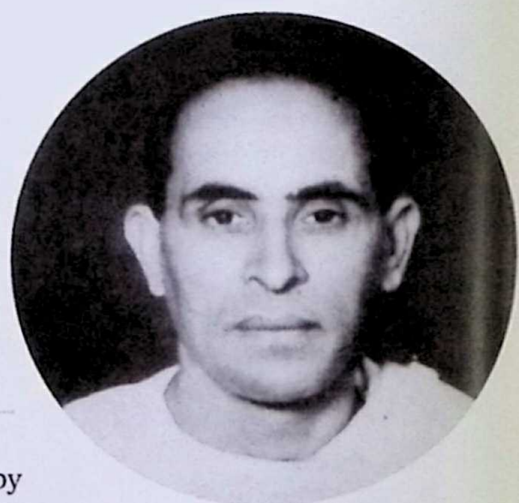
9. The dyads and triads are supported by the One, which can be discovered by enquiry.

10. Knowledge and ignorance are inter-related. Real knowledge arises by enquiring for whom both knowledge and ignorance occur.

11. Not to seek the Self which is the source of both knowledge and ignorance is real ignorance.

12. True knowledge is self-effulgent: it is neither knowledge nor ignorance.

13. Knowledge of diversity is ignorance, yet it is not apart from the Self, like the shapes of



ornaments which are not apart from the gold.

14. 'You' and 'he' exist when the 'I' exists. If the root of the 'I' - the One - is found, 'You' and 'he' will also shine as the One.

15. Past and future are only the present when they occur, thus the present alone exists.
16. Time and space do not exist apart from the Self.

17. To those who have not realised, the 'I' is of the size of the body. To those who have, it is limitless.



FORTY VERSES ON REALITY

by RAMANA MAHARSHI

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY BY S. S. COHEN

18. To those who have not realised, the world is confined to the space it occupies. To those who have, it is the limitless substratum of the world.

19. Arguments about destiny and free-will are carried on by those who have not realised. Those who have, are free from both.

20. Seeing the Self is seeing God, so the Self is not other than God.

21. To see God is to be absorbed by God.

22. God shines in the mind. But to know God the mind has to turn inward.

23. Although the world disappears with the 'I', the 'I' continues to exist in sleep as in waking.

24. Neither the body nor the Self says 'I': between them the ego rises and ties them together.

25. The ego takes a body and accomplishes various acts. It takes one body after another till it is destroyed by *vichara*.

26. The ego being the all, surrendering it is surrendering all.

27. To destroy the ego the source of its emergence has to be sought and retained as the real state.

28. The seeking has to be deep within one-self, like diving to recover a precious object that has fallen in deep waters.

29. The *vichara* is not muttering 'I', but sinking the mind into its source.

30. On reaching the heart, the 'I' subsides and the real 'I-I' manifests in its place.

31. Having extinguished the ego the *jnani* has no other purpose in the bliss of the Self.

32. Although 'Thou art THAT', say the Vedas, not to investigate into one's nature and 'abide as THAT' is mental weakness.

33. Self-knowledge is not duality : the Self being single, it is itself both the object as well as the subject.

34. Disputing the nature of the Self without attempting Self-realisation merely constitutes delusion.

35. Thaumaturgic powers are like dream-magic - they do not entrap the Self-realised.

36. It is not necessary to go on meditating 'I am THAT', for one always is THAT.

37. A Non-duality prevails always, whether as the world or as the Self.

38. The sense of doership reaps the fruits of actions (*karma*): *karma* ends when the doer realises his true nature.

39. Bondage and Liberation are more notions in the mind: they

cease when he who is bound is enquired into and realised.

40. True Liberation has no form, and destroys the very ego which distinguishes between one kind of it and another.

S. S. Cohen had his first darshan of Sri Ramana Maharishi in 1936. Blessed with a keen intellect and intense aspiration to realise the Self, he grasped the import of the Master's teachings and dedicated his entire life to intense spiritual practice under the guidance of the Master.

Courtesy:
Sri Ramanasramam,
Tiruvannamalai.



An aura of spirituality

Sri Ramanasramam is steeped in spirituality, the legacy of the Maharshi

▪ T. S. S. ▪

T

he blasts of horns from trucks, buses and cars speeding on the Chengam Road, cutting through Tiruvannamalai town, is deafening. On a long compound wall, a semi-circular arch erected atop gateposts, announces in English and Tamil, "Sri Ramanasramam". The arch is topped by the "Om" symbol in Sanskrit and the symbol is inside a circle with rays emanating from it. Obviously, this represents the sun. Above the Tamil legend is an emblem which looks like a star. The nameboard is simplicity in itself.

Once you step inside, there is silence and peace. On the right side is a simple building with a verandah. People work with quiet efficiency there. This is the

office of Sri Ramanasramam. There is a never-ending stream of devotees entering the office rooms. Be it Dr. C.N. Srinivasamurthy, K.S. Kannan, or Sivadas Krishnan, they welcome the devotees with a smile, answer their queries politely and if they want to stay in the ashram guest house, they are allotted a room quickly, free of cost. The devotees are then told how to reach the nearby guest-houses. The office personnel are never rude to anybody. Nobody shouts or gives orders to another.

As you ascend a few steps some feet away, the sacred Arunachala hill looms into view, with its peak clearly visible. It is clear we are at the foot of the hill. On the left is the very heart of Sri Ramanasramam: the temples

• A view of the Ramanasramam premises with the summit of the sacred Arunachala hill visible in the background.

• PHOTO:

T.S. SUBRAMANIAN



On the left wall of the hall is a large picture of Sri Ramana Maharshi. His face looks serene, radiating peace. Devotees reverentially bow before the picture

dedicated to Azhagammal, mother of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, and to Ramana himself, the fully realised sage of Arunachala. The temples are situated next to each other. The temple dedicated to mother is fittingly named Matrubhuteswarar (the Lord who has taken the role of mother unto Himself). After Azhagammal attained *mukti* on May 19, 1922 at Skandasramam on the hill, about one kilometre away from the present site, her body was brought down here and buried at a sacred spot. On her *samadhi* was installed a Sivalingam brought from Benares (Varanasi), and a shrine was built enclosing it. By 1949, it had metamorphosed into a temple, with the Matrubhuteswarar (the Sivalingam) in the *garbha griha* and a *vimana* rising above it. Pujas are done to the Sivalingam and *aarathi* performed. There is a *pradakshina patha* (circumambulatory passage) around the sanctum. Just outside the *garbha griha* are the idols of Ganesa, Muruga and the Navagrahas (the nine planets).

There is a big hall in front of the Matrubhuteswarar temple. On the left wall of the hall is a large picture of Sri Ramana Maharshi. His face looks serene, radiating peace. Devotees reverentially bow before the picture. A group of women devotees, including foreigners wearing saris, are seated on the floor below the picture of Ramana. They are reciting Sanskrit *slokas*. On the right wall is a large board with the caption "Death Experience of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi at the Age of Sixteen". It contains, in the first person singular, his narrative of the great experience he had in July 1896 in the upstairs room of his house in Madurai. From the experience rose the seminal question "Who am I?" He was known as Venkataraman then and this experience changed his life



forever. Many people pause to read the board fully. In the hall, there is a large aesthetic-looking sofa, sculpted out of stone by "Sofa" Gounder, who was a devotee of Ramana. The sofa is painted with beautiful designs and its backrest has the emblem "Om". It has two lion sculptures as arm rests. On the sofa is a sculpture of a seated Ramana. Gounder gifted it to Ramana, and according to his wish, Ramana sat on it or laid down on it for some months.

Adjacent to his mother Azhagammal's *samadhi* is that of Sri Ramana Maharshi's. After he attained

• **CONTRA-DISTINCTION:** (Top and Below): The entrance to Sri Ramanasramam in the late 1930s, with the *jutkas* parked there, and the present-day entrance. The arched board remains the same. - PHOTOS: SRI RAMANASRAMAM AND S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



• **THE TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE:** The board containing the description of Death Experience of Sri Ramana Maharshi displayed in the hall in front of his mother's *samadhi*. The aesthetically painted "kal" (stone) sofa and a sculpture of the Maharshi can be seen.

- PHOTO:

S.R. RAGHUNATHAN
(Bottom)

Niranjanananda Swami, the younger brother of Ramana and *sarvadhikari* of the ashram.

- PHOTO:

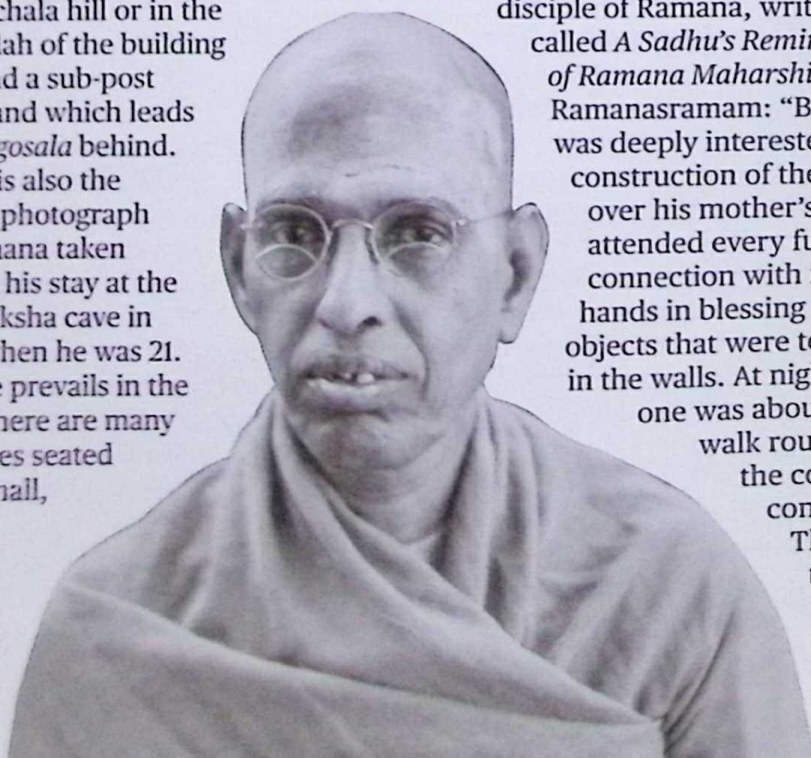
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

mahanirvana at 8.47 p.m. on April 14, 1950, his body was buried here, close to the tomb of Azhagammal. A beautiful Sivalingam was installed over his *samadhi*. This temple, dedicated to Maharshi, is called Ramaneswara Mahalingam. Although it is called Mahalingam – the great *linga* – it is small in size. An ornate *mantapa* with carved pillars houses the Sivalingam. Behind the Ramaneswara Mahalingam is an idol of Ramana. This *mantapa* is situated at the end of a large hall, with a wide entrance and big windows. The hall is, therefore, airy. There are several pictures of Ramana, seated on rocks in different places on the Arunachala hill or in the verandah of the building that had a sub-post office and which leads to the *gosala* behind. There is also the famed photograph of Ramana taken during his stay at the Virupaksha cave in 1902 when he was 21. Silence prevails in the hall. There are many devotees seated in the hall,

meditating. There are foreigners among them. An air of spirituality suffuses the place.

Pupils of the Yajur Veda Patasala, situated on the ashram premises, chant the Veda every morning and evening in the *mantapa* which houses the Ramaneswara Mahalingam. When the chanting is underway, there is silence and a deeply spiritual atmosphere prevails. The pupils of this Veda Patasala used to chant the Yajur Vedam before Ramana every morning and evening when he was alive. So the tradition continues to this day.

Sadhu Arunachala (Major A.W. Chadwick) from England, a devoted disciple of Ramana, writes in his book called *A Sadhu's Reminiscences of Ramana Maharshi*, 1961, Sri Ramanasramam: "Bhagavan was deeply interested in the construction of the shrine built over his mother's tomb. He attended every function in connection with it, placing his hands in blessing on the various objects that were to be enclosed in the walls. At night, when no one was about, he would walk round and round the construction, consecrating it. That he should take such a



demonstrative part in anything has a very deep significance. It was extremely rare and has been doubted by many, but I myself was an eyewitness to these things and can vouch for their truth.

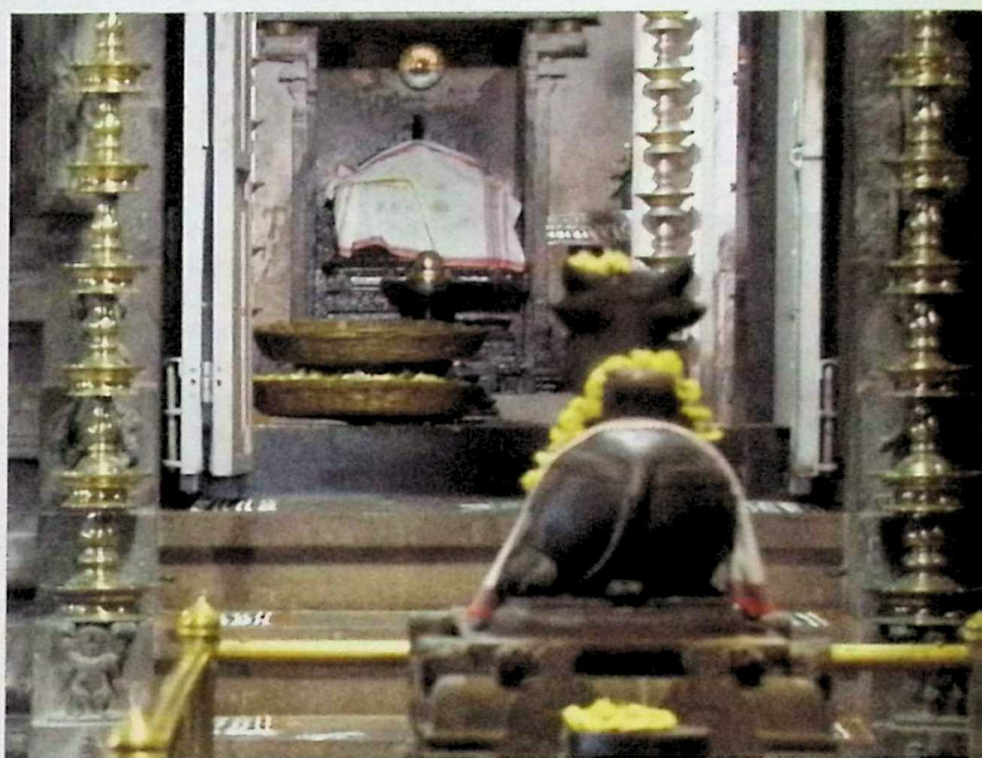
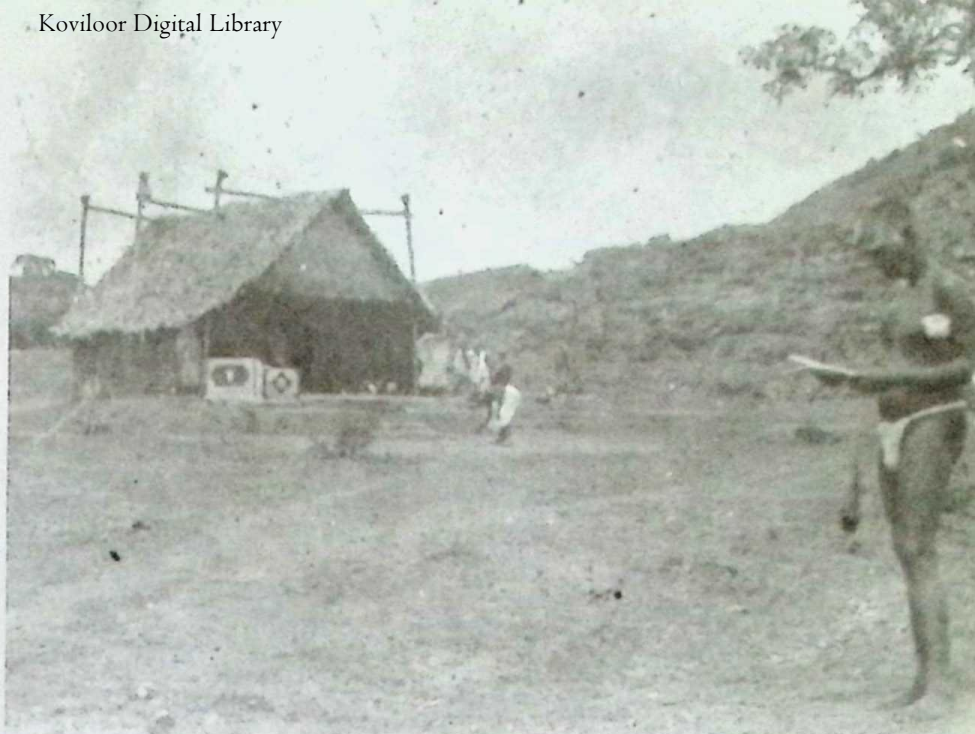
"He took a personal interest in the cutting of the Sri Chakra Meru in granite, which was installed in the completed temple and is regularly worshipped. This is about one and a half feet square and proportionately high. At the time of *kumbhabhishekam*, on the penultimate night before the sacred water was poured over the images, he personally supervised the installation in the inner shrine. It was an extremely hot night and with three charcoal retorts for melting the cement adding to the heat, it must have been intolerable inside the airless cave of the inner shrine. But Bhagavan sat there telling the workmen what to do for about an hour and a half.

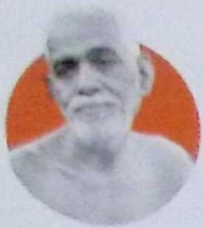
"On the last night of the function, he went in procession, opening the doors of the new hall and temple, passing straight up into the inner shrine, where he stood for some minutes with both the hands laid on the Sri Chakra in blessing. I happened to be at his side that night the whole time... Strangely something made me keep by him on this occasion and on account of this, I was able to understand his deep interest in the temple [for his mother] and especially in the Sri Chakra. It was because of this that I was instrumental after Bhagavan's passing, in persuading the ashram authorities to institute Sri Chakra pujas six times a month."

These two temples, with their halls, dedicated to Ramana Maharshi and his mother, are a testimony to the spiritual centre that the ashram continues to be to this day, 70 years after the passing of Ramana.

* **(Top):** A hut built over the *samadhi* of Azhagammal, mother of Ramana, after she attained *mukti* in 1922 and Ramana reading a letter. - PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM **(Middle):** The sanctum of the Matrubhuteswarar temple, with the Sivalingam, which was built over the *samadhi* of Ramana's mother, Azhagammal. - PHOTO: S.R. RAGUNATHAN. **(Bottom):** The tribals from the Javadi hills, where the Arunachala hill is located, on the ashram premises.

- PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM





Preserving a holy legacy

Sri Ramanasramam has an exhaustive library and a museum that shows us how the Maharshi lived

• T. S. S. •



ri Ramanasramam is a many-faceted organisation. Not only does it have temples dedicated to Sri Ramana Maharshi and his mother Azhagammal, but there is the room where Ramana attained *mahanirvana*, an archive where his personal effects are displayed, a library, a Yajur Veda Patasala, a *gosala*, and even a big gobar gas plant. Besides, there is a spacious dining hall kept spic and span, where several hundred devotees are served breakfast, a wholesome lunch, tiffin and dinner, all free of cost, every day of the year.

• **RAMANA'S MAHANIRVANA:** The doors leading to the room where Sri Ramana Maharshi attained *mahanirvana* at 8.47 p.m. on April 14, 1950.

• PHOTO: T.S. SUBRAMANIAN

On the ashram premises are memorials for the cow Lakshmi, Valli, the deer, "the blessed" crow, and Jackie, the dog. There are quarters for the committed, elderly devotees of Ramana. There are coconut groves. Sri Ramanasramam is running a medical centre too, where a couple of hundred people are treated as outpatients every day. The treatment is free.

There is a bookshop adjacent to the ashram office, where devotees stop to buy books on the Maharshi published by Sri Ramanasramam. The entire ashram premises are kept scrupulously clean. A tranquil atmosphere prevails everywhere with greenery around including coconut groves.

While V.S. Ramanan, grandnephew of the Maharshi, is the president of Sri Ramanasramam. Ramanan's younger brother, V. Subramanian, is the administrator. Eighty-year-old Subramanian, popularly known as Mani Anna, has a hands-on approach in running the ashram. He is soft-spoken and mild-mannered but nothing escapes his keen eye. There are several other trustees too. Dr. Venkat Ramanan will take over as the president of the ashram from his father, V.S. Ramanan, in 2020.

The small room where Ramana attained *mahanirvana* is situated opposite to the two temples and a spiritual atmosphere prevails around it. Peacocks are seen on the small lawn in front of the room or on its terrace. There are two tall *nagalingam* trees





standing like sentinels just outside the room. Above the room's entrance is a small board in Tamil and English. It says in Tamil that this is the place where Bhagavan attained *videha kaivalyam*. The English version says, "The place where Sri Bhagavan attained *mahanirvana*, 14.4.50, night 8.47 hrs." Ramana's devotees make it a point to pray in front of the room where he attained *siddhi*. At the moment he attained *siddhi*, a meteor appeared in the sky and travelled slowly towards the north over the top of Arunachala hill. Thousands of people in various parts of the then Madras State saw this spectacle happening.

The room where Ramana attained *mahanirvana* is kept neat and tidy. Inside the room is the couch on which he spent the last year of his life. On the couch, draped with a spotlessly white cloth, is a picture of Ramana. Flowers are offered in front of it every day. There is a big pillow covered with a white cloth. Above this picture is another photograph that shows Ramana lying on the couch, his left arm bandaged. He seems to be smiling. The picture was taken after one of the four surgeries was done to remove the malignant tumour that appeared on his left arm. There are other pictures of Ramana as well.

• The *mahanirvana* room, and the walking stick, the hand-held fan and the various vessels used by Sri Ramana Maharshi, displayed in the spotlessly maintained room.

- PHOTOS:

S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



WHO AM I ?

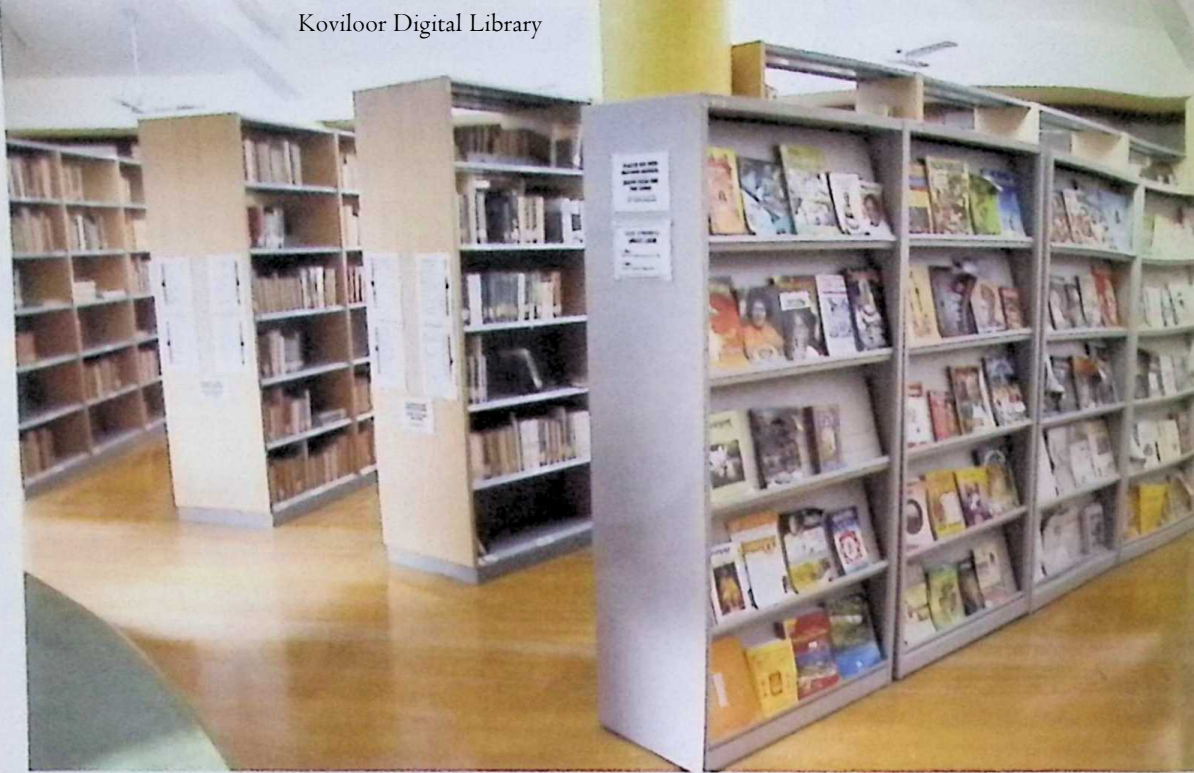
* WELL-STOCKED:

(Top) The ashram's library has 700 biographies of Sri Ramana Maharshi written in 30 languages and 35,000 books.

(Bottom): The clock and the radio used by Ramana displayed in the archives.

- PHOTOS:

S. R. RAGHUNATHAN



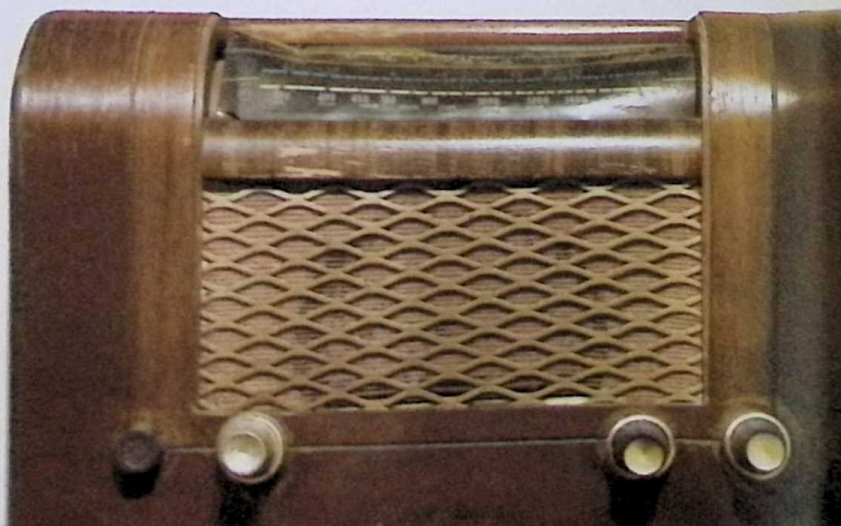
A number of personal effects used by him are displayed in the room. They include the original calendar which shows the date April 14, 1950, and a clock which shows 8.47 hours. His *kamandalam*, walking stick, a torch light, tumblers, utensils, braziers and an electric fan that he used are on display. There is the radio to which he used to listen. A hand-fan (*visiri* in Tamil), shaped like a bodhi tree's leaf and two begging bowls, are kept on the couch. The begging bowls were gifted to him. There are many other articles on display.

Nearby are two memorials with Sivalingams. One is dedicated to Niranjanananda Swami, Ramana's younger brother, known as Nagasundaram. He was the *sarvadhikari* of the ashram when Ramana was alive. He was absorbed in Arunachala on 29th January, 1953. The *samadhi* of Swami Ramanananda (T. N. Venkataraman), son of Niranjanananda, is situated next. Ramanananda, who was born in 1914, was absorbed in Arunachala in 2007. He was president of the ashram.

The library, housed in a beautifully-designed, circular building, is well-stocked. The librarian is J. Jayaraman, a scholar on Ramana. According to R. Ramesh Babu, who works in the library, about 700 biographies of Ramana have been so far published in 30 languages. The books are in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Kannada, English, Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Japanese, the Dutch, the Finnish, German, Greek, Hebrew, Russian, Italian, Korean, Serbian and so forth. The library has several thousands of books on Ramana's life, his teachings, his replies to devotees' questions, disciples' reminiscences about him and more.

The library has books called *Thanga Kai* (the "Golden Hand") which contain Ramana's prose and poetical works in his own handwriting in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Sanskrit.

According to Ramesh Babu, the library had its origin in 1935, when the Maharshi was alive, with a bureau stacked with books, mostly gifted to him. The library has all the copies of *Mountain Path*, a



quarterly journal, with erudite essays on different subjects written by scholars. The first issue of *Mountain Path* came out in 1964. Its first editor was Arthur Osborne, a committed disciple of Ramana, who lived just outside the ashram with his wife and children. It is called Osborne Lane.

Karthik V. is full of appreciation for what he calls "the state-of-the-art archives" where the personal effects used by the Maharshi, artefacts gifted to him, the letters, his poems and prose works written in his own hand in Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu are "beautifully preserved". Karthik, photographer, Sri Ramanasramam, who painstakingly restored hundreds of photographs of Ramana, the places he stayed on the hill etc., tells us, "You should programme some time to visit the ashram archives."

The building housing the archives is beautifully-designed and the display system is excellent. On display is the Maharshi's core teaching, *Naan yaar* i.e., "Who am I?", written in his own hand in Telugu, Sanskrit and Tamil. There is the original letter written by him in Tamil on August 29, 1896 when he left his home in Madurai "in search of my father and obedience to his command" and headed towards Tiruvannamalai. He has written the letter in a bold, flowing handwriting. On display is the five-stanza

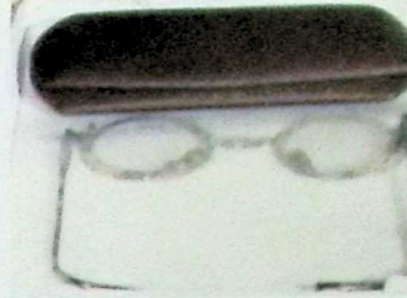
poem written by Narayana Guru, the social reformer from Kerala, when he met Ramana in 1917 at Skandasramam. According to P. Sashidharan, assistant, archives, Ramana wrote down Narayana Guru's composition later in Malayalam.

The Maharshi's teeth, nails and hair are carefully preserved. There are several stamps and postal cancellations issued in honour of Ramana.

There is a couch/sofa made for Ramana, ornate walking sticks gifted to him, his easy chair, the brazier to keep him warm during winter, a stool, his bookshelf and beautiful baskets in which his devotees brought him fruits. "The fruits were cut into pieces and distributed to all the devotees present," Sashidharan says. "Bhagavan never used costly articles," he added. The binoculars that Ramana used to gaze at the Arunachala hill is there.

A picture of him using the binoculars to study the hill is displayed. Pencils and erasers that he used, begging bowls and tumblers, a small plate, a jug and a bowl, all made of stainless steel, are showcased. Even the shaving brush and the knives used by a barber to shave him are kept in the archives.

The Rolleiflex camera used by Dr. T.N. Krishnaswamy, a devotee, to take pictures of Ramana is on display. Dr. TNK took many pictures of Ramana in the 1930s.



• EXHIBITS: The spectacles and the shaving kit used by Ramana, the Rolleiflex camera used by Dr. T.N. Krishnaswamy to take pictures of Ramana in the 1930s, and various things gifted to the Maharshi by his devotees, on display in the archives.

- PHOTOS: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



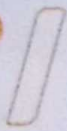
WHO AM I?



The meteor and mahanirvana

The appearance of a luminous meteor on the horizon and its slow trajectory towards the north above the Arunachala hill, exactly at the time Sri Ramana Maharshi attained mahanirvana, is folklore now

▪ T. S. S. ▪



“Is it true that a meteor appeared over the Arunachala hill when Bhagavan attained *siddhi*?” asked a colleague. “Will you write about it?” another enquired. “You should,” advised a third. The appearance of a luminous

meteor on the horizon and its slow trajectory towards the north above the Arunachala hill, exactly at the time Ramana Maharshi attained *mahanirvana* at 8.47 p.m., on April 14, 1950, might have become folklore now. However, it is a fact that a bright meteor appeared on the sky at the time when



Ramana attained *siddhi* and headed slowly towards the north, above the hill. Reporters, photographers and thousands of people living across the then Madras State, have testified to this occurrence. Strangely, no photographer took a picture of the slow-moving meteor.

Ramana had a way with animals, whether they were peacocks, peahens, squirrels, sparrows, moneys, rabbits, cow Lakshmi, crows, dogs, deer, cheetah cubs and tiger cubs. He lavished his affection on them and they reciprocated in full measure. His last words, before he attained *mahanirvana*, was to feebly ask an attendant around 7 p.m., "Have the peacocks been fed?"

The Rani of Baroda had gifted a white peacock to Ramana. It was fond of him and was constantly by his side. On the night that Ramana attained *mahanirvana*, the white peacock stood on the roof of the room where he was lying on a couch and was screeching

without respite.

S.S. Cohen, in his epilogue to B.V. Narsimha Swami's biography of Ramana, quotes Monsieur Cartier-Bresson, the famous French photographer, about the event. Cartier-Bresson told Cohen, a devoted follower of Ramana, around 9 p.m., that he (Cartier-Bresson) was in the open space in front of his room in Tiruvannamalai town, when he and his friends saw a vividly luminous shooting star with a tail coming from the south.

The photographer said the shooting star, which was "unlike any I had seen before", moved slowly across the sky, reached the top of Arunachala hill and disappeared behind it. They deduced what had happened and looked at their watches. It was 8.47 p.m. "We raced to the ashram only to find that our premonition was sadly true: the Master had passed into *mahanirvana* that very minute." (From *Self-realisation, The Life and Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi*, published by Sri Ramanasramam.)

Sadhu Arunanachala (Major A.W. Chadwick) has this to say in his book: "There were some American reporters and photographers who were there just out for a scoop. They were living less than half a mile away. One of them standing outside the house looked up and saw very bright star or meteor swing slowly across the sky towards the north over the top of the hill. He called out to the rest of the party who ran out and saw the same phenomenon. One and all agreed that something had happened to Bhagavan... People in Madras (now Chennai) too saw it. Some got into their cars immediately and made their way to the ashram. This is a fact which I will not attempt to explain but must accept it as it happened." (From *A Sadhu's Reminiscences of Ramana Maharshi*, published by Sri Ramanasramam.)

Kaikobad, a Parsi devotee of Ramana, was standing on the terrace of his residence in Madras when he saw the shooting star.

He deduced what had happened and raced to Tiruvannamalai in a car.

★ The immaculately maintained room where Sri Ramana Maharshi shed his body on April 14, 1950.

— PHOTO: T.S. SUBRAMANIAN





Education amidst spirituality

A glimpse of the Veda Patasala and the gosala

▪ T. S. S. ▪

A

DIVINE CHANT: (Above)
Pupils of the Yajur Veda Patasala, run by Sri Ramanasramam, chanting the Yajur Vedam, at the samadhi of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

- PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

An important highlight of the multifaceted activities of Sri Ramanasramam is the *Veda Patasala* run by it to teach the Yajur Veda. The *patasala* is situated in a simple-looking building on the ashram premises. It was a pleasure to meet its teacher and the bright-looking pupils, full of verve. The young teacher, S. Narayanan says that nine *vidyarthi*s are from Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. The pupils are admitted to the course when they are between eight and 13 years old. According to 30-year-old Narayanan, it is an eight-year, residential course

to learn the Yajur Veda. Each batch consists of 20 *vidyarthi*s. When one batch of pupils finishes learning it in eight or nine years, another would be admitted. The *vidyarthi*s are taught English, mathematics and science as well. Each of these subjects is taught two days in a week. The pupils can write the plus two examination. "Sri Ramanasramam has done this arrangement. It provides everything for their education here. Everything is free," says Narayanan, who is from Gokarnam, Uttara Kannada district.



The pupils' education including books, stay and food are free. He appreciates the Sri Ramanasramam management's keen interest in running the *patasala*. "You cannot find an administration, running a Veda Patasala, like this," the teacher says.

P. Anand, Vijeta, Darshan Viswanatha, Vivas Divaspathi, N. Sriram, G. Sadanand and others are from Yellapur, Uttara Kannada. A few pupils from the Deekshidar families in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, study here. Nine-year-old Sri Vathsan is from Hashhinapuram, Chromepet, Chennai. He is in the second year of the course. Anand says that he joined the *patasala* more than five years ago. His father is a bank employee and mother, a housewife. Sriram is in the fourth year of the course. "I like everything here," he says. The *vidyarthi*s chant the Yajur Veda at 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. near the *samadhi* of Sri Ramana Maharshi every day. It was done in the presence of Ramana when he was alive.

The ashram features a *gosala* too on its premises. The *gosala* is run efficiently. G. Kasi Konar says there are about 300 cows and calves. The yield from the cows is about 250 litres to 300 litres every day. The cows, which look healthy, belong to different breeds. There are two humped bulls of the Gir variety.

When K.S. Kannan, the ashram office manager, touched the forehead of one of the humped bulls, it remained calm. Kasi Konar says, "It will not do anything to visitors!"

★ **(Top):** S. Narayanan, the teacher at the Yajur Veda Patasala, with his pupils. **(Middle):** The *gosala* which houses 300 cows. **(Bottom):** The kitchen where food is cooked for breakfast, lunch, tiffin and dinner and served free to devotees.

- PHOTOS: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN





"I felt like a king"

Sri Ramana Maharshi described how he began to beg for food once he left his material life



• T. S. S. •

After Venkataraman left home and renounced everything including his sacred thread and money at Ayyankulam, Tiruvannamalai, on September 1, 1896, what provokes a lot of interest is how he took to begging from then on. He had no possessions whatsoever - just the loin cloth he wore after he tore up the dhoti he was wearing and used a piece from it to convert it into a *koupinam*. Venkataraman came from a middle-class family, but he was penniless now, with no roof over his head. He was alone in a totally new place. He was just 16 years old. On the first day of his arrival at Tiruvannamalai from Madurai, he spent the night in the open front *mantapa* of Arunachaleswara temple. Rains pounded the town that night and the bare-bodied Venkataraman got drenched. He ran here and there to find a shelter and finally lay down in the *thinnai* (open verandah) of a house near the temple. He had no food to eat earlier in the day because he had thrown away whatever money he had. He was cold and hungry the second day. He had his first *bhiksha* that forenoon, thanks to a *mauna* swamy who asked another sadhu called Palaniswamy to fetch him food. Palaniswamy brought him cold rice with salt sprinkled on top, in a tin vessel. "That was the first *bhiksha* which Arunachaleswara gave

me!" Ramana Maharshi exclaimed many years later.

Venkataraman took to begging from the third day of his arrival in the Tiruvannamalai town. He had his own rules in this. He begged with empty hands. He would not accept money. He would choose a street, stand in front of a house and clap two or three times. For he was given to silence. He would stretch out his cupped palms. If the inmates of the house dropped food into them, he would eat it standing in the open street and wipe his hands on his head. That would be the only meal he would have for the entire day. He would not beg again in the same house. So much so that Ramana joked later that there was not a single house in the Tiruvannamalai town where he did not beg. Later, he begged in the *agraharam* (where brahmins lived) streets around Arunagirinathar temple.

When G.V. Subbaramayya, a committed disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi, asked him about his early days and whether he ever went about asking for alms, Ramana replied that the first time he begged for food was from Chinna Gurukkal's wife (the junior priest in the temple). Ramana said, "You cannot conceive the majesty and dignity that I felt while begging. The first day, when I begged from Gurukkal's wife, I felt bashful about it as a result of habits of upbringing, but after that there was absolutely no feeling of abasement. I felt

(Above): The begging bowls made of coconut shells, and a torchlight gifted to Ramana by his devotees.

like a king and more than a king. I have sometimes received stale gruel from some house and taken it without any salt or flavouring, in the open street, before great pandits and other important men who used to come and prostrate themselves before me at the asramam, then wiped my hands on my head and passed on supremely happy and in a state of mind in which even emperors were mere straws in my sight. You can't imagine it. It is because there is such a path that we find tales in the history of kings giving up their thrones and taking to this path." (*Day by Day with Bhagavan* by A. Devaraja Mudaliar, published by Sri Ramanasramam.)

Was Ramana thinking of a parallel in the Buddha's life when he said this? When Siddhartha abandoned his family, palace and possessions, and walked out - called the Great Renunciation in the Buddhist lore - his son Rahul was just seven days old. Siddhartha left his home when he was 29 in search of Enlightenment. He received Enlightenment eight or nine years later, under a Bodhi tree on the banks of Neranjara river in Bodhi Gaya, near the present-day Patna. He became the Buddha, but was a mendicant with a begging bowl. After quite a bit of wandering and spreading his gospel of Dhamma, he happened to reach the gates of his erstwhile palace at Kapilavastu, and begged with his bowl. His wife, Yasodhara, knew that the Buddha was at the gates. Rahul was now about nine years old. She told Rahul to ask his father when he was going to bequeath the palace and other properties to him. When the child asked him for his inheritance, the Buddha gave Rahul his begging bowl.

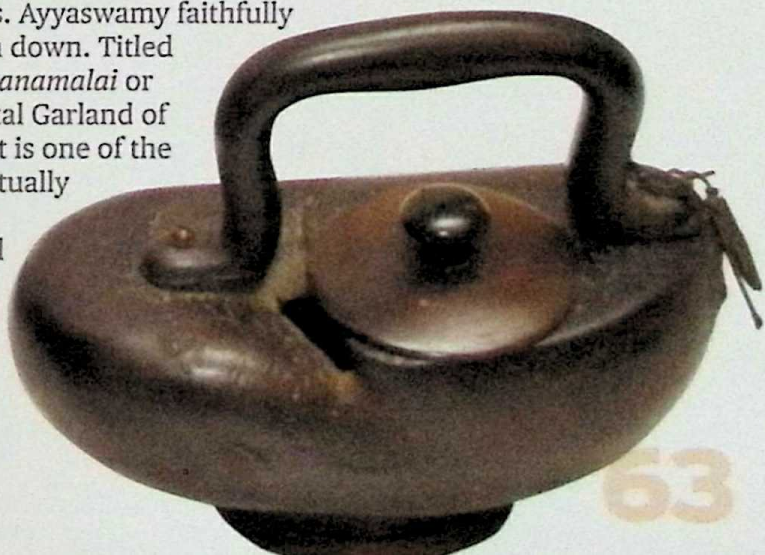
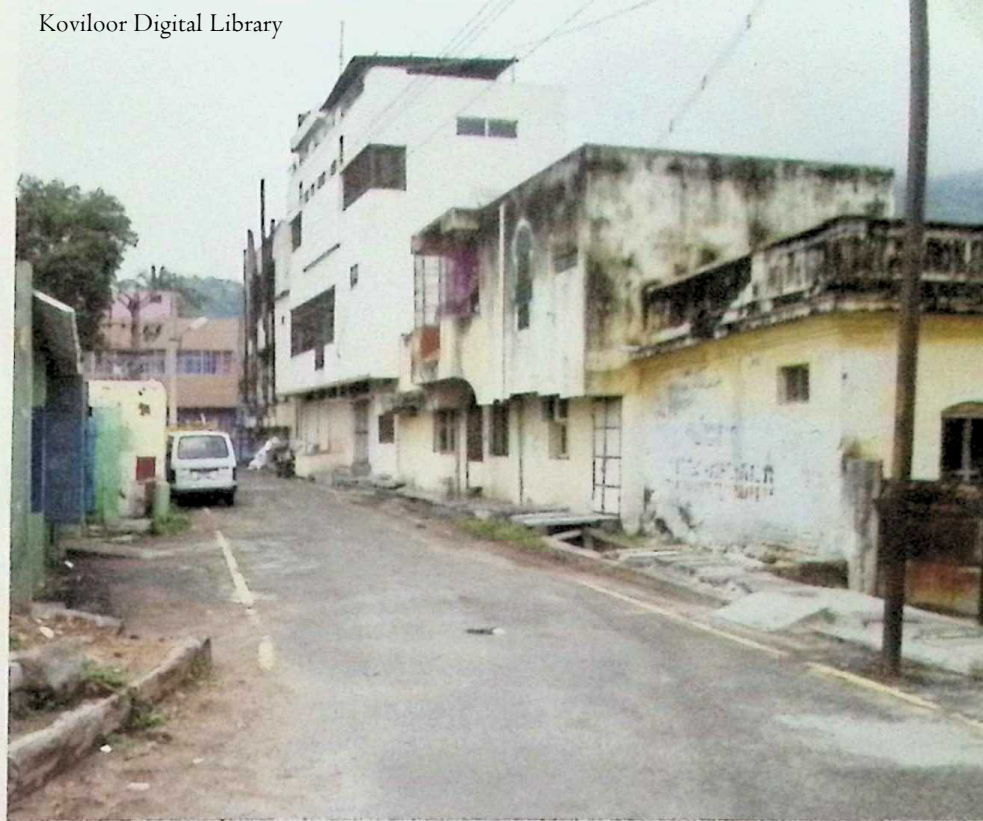
There is a superb panel of painting in cave number one at Ajanta, portraying this incident. The mural shows Yasodhara and Rahul, the innocent child asking the Buddha for his inheritance, and the Buddha proffering Rahul his begging bowl. The panel shows the Buddha towering above his wife and son.

In the book called *Ramana Periya Puranam*, its author V. Ganesan, grand-nephew of Ramana, narrates

this interesting, humourous incident. Ganesan says: "In the evenings, Bhagavan's attendants [when they were staying in the Virupaksha cave] would beg in the streets to collect food. The traditional song that they sang to collect alms was by Adi Sankara: "Samba Sadasiva, Samba Sadasiva, Samba Sadasiva, Samba Sivom." When the people of the town heard this refrain, they would be ready with food, knowing that Bhagavan's attendants were coming. Knowing this, some miscreants began to go ahead of them, sing the same and collect the food. So Bhagavan's attendants requested him, "Please compose a song that we can sing exclusively to collect alms." Bhagavan, in his usual manner, kept silent. The next day, when they were going around the hill, his disciple Palaniswamy called Ayyaswamy, the most literate among them aside, and said, "Bhagavan is murmuring something. Perhaps he is composing some verses. Take this paper and pencil." During that circumambulation, Bhagavan composed 108 verses. Ayyaswamy faithfully took them down. Titled *Aksharamanamalai* or the "Marital Garland of Letters", it is one of the most spiritually moving, devotional hymns ever written...

• THE MAJESTY AND DIGNITY OF BEGGING: (Top) One of the *agraharam* streets, near Arunagirinathar temple, Ayyankulam, where Sri Ramana Maharshi begged for food with his hands in circa 1898. (Below): The *kamandalam* or the water-pot carried by the Maharshi.

- PHOTOS:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN





Arunachala, the divine hill

*Sri Ramana Maharshi made no bones
about his unvarnished attachment to
the Arunachala hill*

▪ T. S. S. ▪

A

s we drive past Gingee and travel another ten kilometres towards Tiruvannamalai town into a village called Nachipattu, the Arunachala hill looms into view. The entire hill presents itself in a sweep and it is an awesome sight. Less than 45 minutes later, we are at Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai town. From just outside the temple dedicated to Sri Ramana Maharshi and his mother Azhagammal on the ashram premises, the view is mesmerising, narrow though. There it is! The summit of the sacred Arunachala hill. Some

clouds pass, gently strafing the summit as it were. Devotees of Ramana stand rooted to the spot here, captivated by the sight. The next day, the Arunachala hill presents itself in another dimension. It is a challenge for this writer, already breathless, to climb the hill on its cobbled pathway for about a kilometre to reach the Virupaksha cave and the Skandasramam, situated a little above. But 66-year-old T.V. Chandramouli, senior staff member of the ashram, sprints up the hill, barefoot! On either side of the pathway is a dense jungle.

If there was one attachment that Ramana had in the 54 years he spent in

* The Arunachala hill with its peaks and a lake in the foreground.

~ PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



Tiruvannamalai including 22 years on the hill and another 28 years in the ashram built at foot of the hill, it was the unalloyed attachment he had to the Arunachala hill. He was smitten with it. He made no bones about it. For after all, did not the word "Arunachala" drag him when he was 16 years old, all the way from Madurai to Tiruvannamalai?

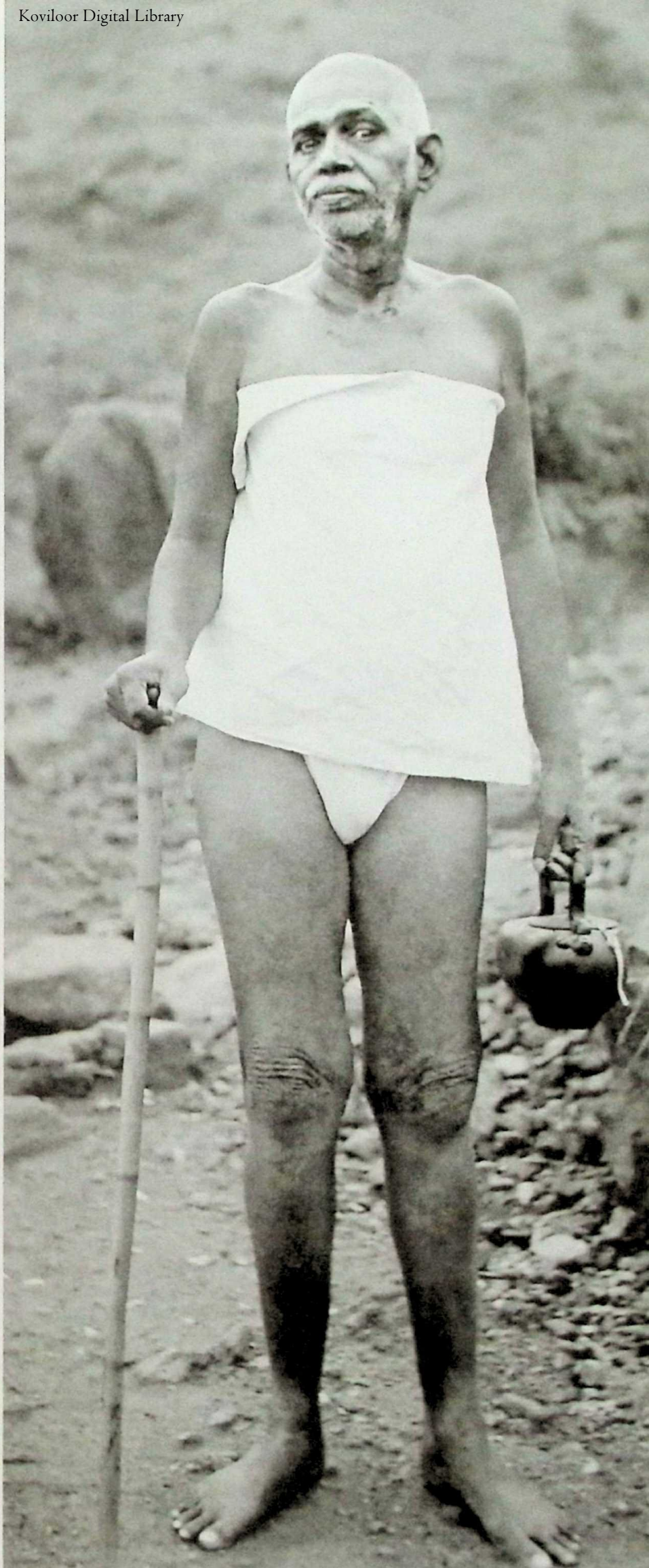
The word "Arunachala" means Red Mountain, that is, a fireball of a mountain. "Arun" means red. "Achala" means that which does not move. You have similar words: Bhadrachalam, Vindhyachal, Vedachalam, etc.

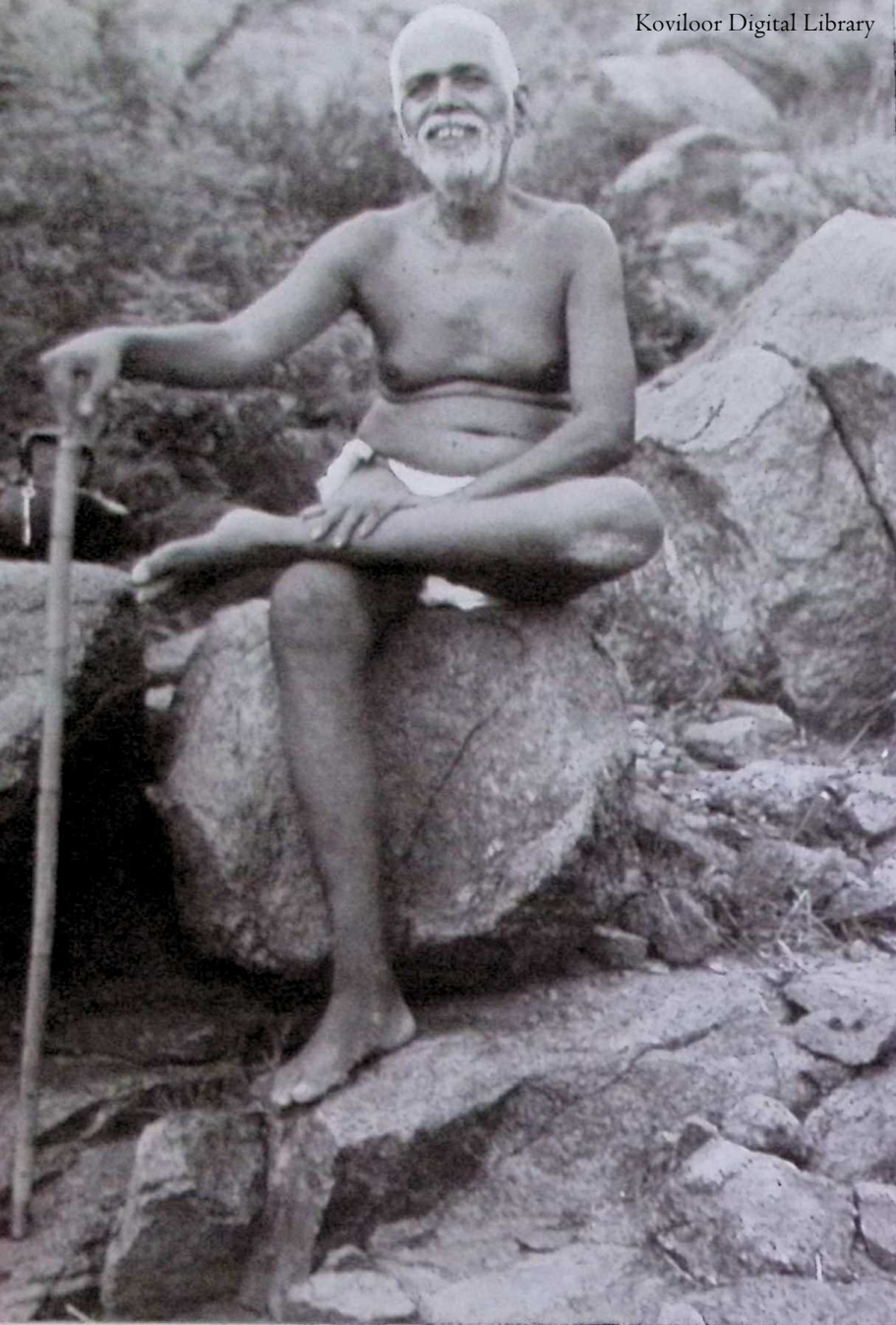
The belief is that when Siva appeared as a towering *lingam* or a column of light in order to solve a dispute between Brahma and Vishnu, he appeared here as a blazing light that manifested as the Arunachala hill. So the mountain is considered God himself and is sacred. It is the powerhouse of spiritual energy.

In his story headlined, "Ramana Maharshi" posted on the website on December 1, 2012, Rajendra Velamakanni says that, "According to *Siva Purana*, Lord Siva is manifested as Tejolinga or as a blazingly bright, luminous *linga* at Tiruvannamalai. This, in a way, seems to be in sync with the geological origin of Arunachala, according to which, the hill was the result of "a violent volcanic eruption." Rajendra Velamakanni adds, "The hill is matched in its grandeur only by the Arunachala shrine (sic) and makes for a mesmerising sight."

In the past 500 years, several saints have lived on the hill before Ramana did. They include: Virupaksha Deva, Guhai Namasivaya, Esana Jnana Desikar, Deiva Sigamani Desikar, Arunagiri Nathar and Seshadri Swamigal. Geologically speaking, the Arunachala hill is among the oldest mountains on the earth. Geologists estimate that it is about 3.4 billion years old. It has a rugged beauty about it. Boulders are strewn

■ PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM





• The Maharshi sitting on a boulder on the hill.

~ PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

everywhere. The vegetation on the hill is a varied lot. It has banyan trees, mango trees, tamarind trees, *karu vela maram* (*Acacia nilotica*), brambles, lantana woody bushes and so on. It has more green cover now than the arid look it had when Ramana arrived at Tiruvannamalai on September 1, 1896. It has five peaks. The tallest is 2,682 feet high. It has many spurs, that is, branches of the main hill. Till 30 years ago, if it rained heavily for a few days, hey presto, many mini waterfalls would materialise on the spurs. Residents of Tiruvannamalai town would make a beeline to the spurs and bathe to their hearts' content in the cascades.

Ramana's attachment to the hill was such that he would roam the hills every day from 1899 when he started staying at the Virupaksha cave. He would set out for the summit any time he wanted to and would traverse "by any route or

even no route". He would insist that it formed the spiritual axis of the earth. Even after he started following a set routine from 1922 in the ashram situated at the foot of the hill, he would go for a walk on the hill at least three times a day. He would stroll on the hill after breakfast, lunch and in the evening. He knew the topography of the hill including its spurs and peaks, which way to reach the summit, its natural springs, the valleys, outsized banyan trees, the pathways used by woodcutters and shepherds, and its medicinal plants too. Once, Ramana told Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, one of his committed disciples with boyish enthusiasm, "Nayana, there is no inch of ground all over Arunachala that has not been trodden by these feet during the time when I was living on the hill, especially during the Virupaksha period. I have been up the hill, and down the dales and roamed about the interior region where no forest guard would dare to go." (From *Timeless in Time, Sri Ramana Maharshi* by A. R. Natarajan, Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning, Bengaluru.)

He has composed verses on the hill including *Aksharamanamalai*, *Arunachala Ashtagam*, *Arunachala Padhigam* and *Arunachala Pancharatnam*.

Sadhu Arunachala (Major A. W. Chadwick) says in his *A Sadhu's reminiscences of Ramana Maharshi*, "Bhagavan adored the hill and was never happier than when wandering about its slopes." As Chadwick says elsewhere in the book, "He [Ramana] never asked us what had brought us to him, but what has brought us again to Arunachala. He had so completely identified himself with the mountain."

According to V. Ganesan, "If emphasising the importance of Self-enquiry was his first nature, his second nature was undoubtedly going around the hill. He not only did it by way of example but specifically recommended it to others."

Ramana was so convinced about the hill's spiritual power that he asserted, "This is Arunachala, the ocean of grace which confers the highest state [of liberation] at the mere thought of it."



• (Top) The Maharshi, with his devotees, including the photographer Dr. T. N. Krishnaswamy (third from left) on a bund on the Arunachala hill. Dr. Krishnaswamy took hundreds of pictures of the Bhagavan in the 1930s. (Bottom) Ramana looking at the hill with binoculars.

- PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM

Ramana loved gazing at the hill. When he kept looking at the hill sitting in the hall of his mother's shrine or in the Old Hall, he would look distraught and his eyes would have a faraway look. He would fall silent for a few hours. Although expensive articles were gifted to Ramana by his devotees, he never touched them. But he was fond of using the binoculars gifted to him by a devotee to scan the hill.

There are different versions from Arthur Osborne, A. Devaraj Mudaliar and others about an interesting incident related to Ramana and the hill. When Ramana was walking down a jungle path on the hill around noon on a day when it was hot, an old, Dalit woman standing on the path, abused him in Tamil, using choice expletives. "A curse on you! Why do you keep roaming on the hill? Why can't you stay quiet in a place, like

the Sivalingam?" Although they were extremely carping words, Ramana did not take offence. He used his wit: "This is very good advice."

According to Devaraja Mudaliar, Ramana "also slapped his own cheeks", as if in punishment for not having known what the woman taught him.

"Relating the above incident, Bhagavan said that when first the old woman began abusing him, he could not understand how he deserved it and was dumbfounded as to what offence he could have given to the woman." (From *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Sri Ramanasramam.)

This is Osborne's version - "It could have been no ordinary woman," Sri Bhagavan said when he told the devotees about it, "Who knows who she was?" Certainly, no ordinary outcaste would have dared to speak to a Swami like that. The devotees took it to be a manifestation of Arunagiri Siddha, the Spirit of Arunachala. From that time, Sri Bhagavan gave up roaming on the hillside." (From *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge*, Sri Ramanasramam.)

Ramana loved the hill so much that he drew two beautiful ink sketches of the mountain, portraying its peaks and spurs, the Arunachaleswara temple with its *gopuras* and *vimanas*, the houses around the temple, the coconut trees and the paddy fields at the foot of the hill. The sketches reveal another dimension of his personality - that he was a good landscape painter too.

■ PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM





The girivalam: prayer to the sacred hill

The sacred Arunachala hill is revered by thousands and the girivalam is a special marker of faith

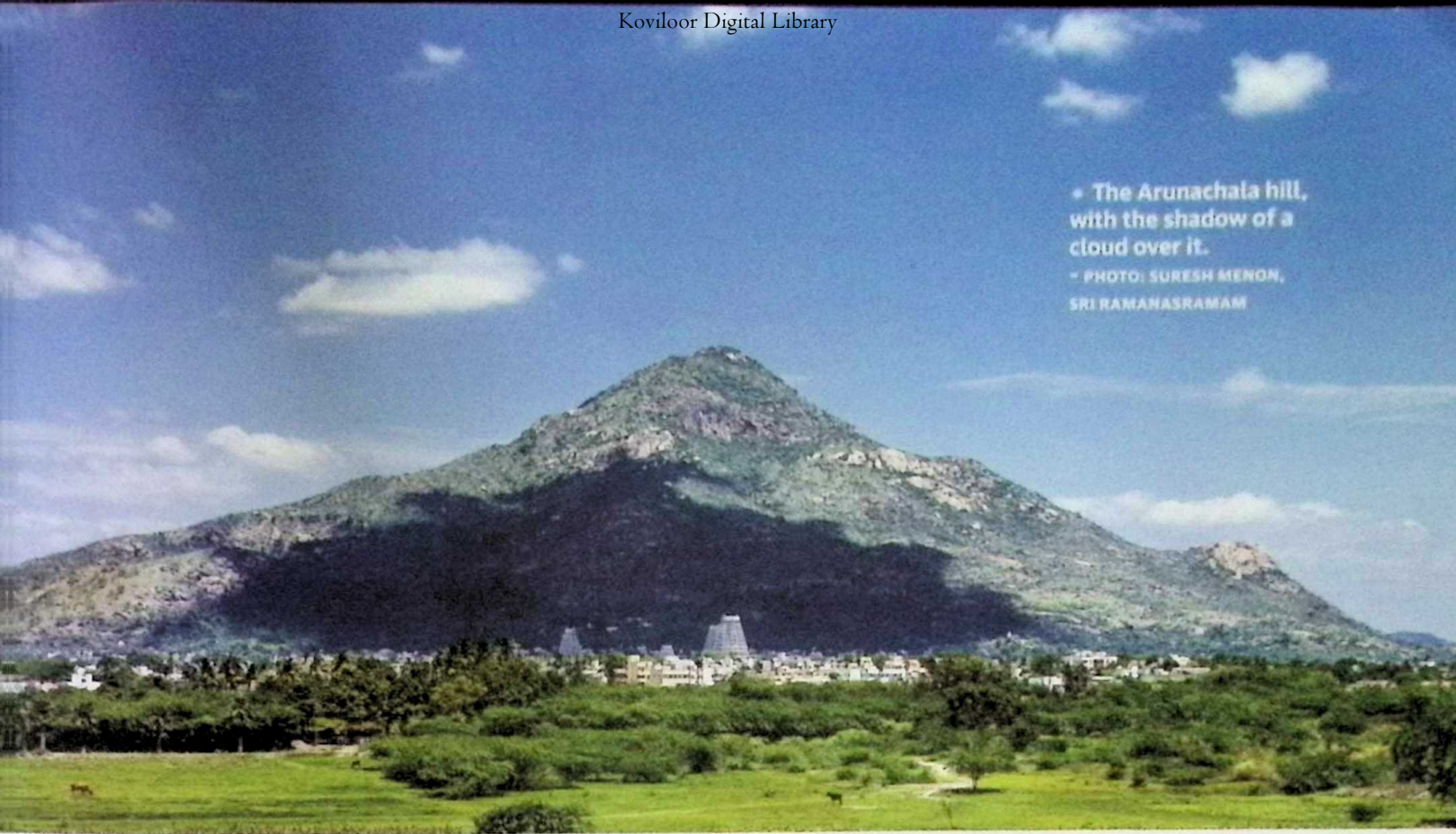
▪ T. S. S. ▪

It was October 13, Sunday, 2019, a full moon day. Although it was only 6 a.m., the Chengam Road that slices through Tiruvannamalai town had already come alive with several thousands of people walking barefoot. They were from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. They were performing what is called *girivalam* or *pradakshina* of the sacred Arunachala hill, at the foot of which is situated the Tiruvannamalai town and the Arunachaleswara temple. In other words, the devotees were circumambulating the Arunachala mountain. This *giripradakshina* entailed their walking, barefoot, 14 km around the hill. It would take more than five hours to finish the walk. Etymologically speaking, “*giri*” means “a hill” and “*valam*” means “to go around”. The belief is that Siva had manifested himself as the Arunachala hill here. So anyone, who does *pradakshina* of the hill, will collect a lot of merit. There was religious fervour in the air on the day. Men were mostly wearing dhoties and were bare-bodied. They had generously applied *vibhuti* or the holy ash on their foreheads, their shoulders and hands. They were walking in groups, chanting “Om Namasivaya”. Bearded sanyasins, wearing saffron robes, with matted hair, were seen everywhere. They moved about in

groups. There were a sizable number of women performing the *girivalam* with enthusiasm. Vehicular traffic had been banned for the day on the *girivalam* route. For, on any full moon day, about four lakh people flock to Tiruvannamalai to circumambulate the hill.

Commerce hung in the air, with scores of pavement shops mushrooming. A vendor had spread his goods on a plastic sheet on the pavement near Pali Theertham around 7 a.m. He was selling *rudraksha* beads, children’s comics, books on Ramana Maharshi, Bhairava worship, Shirdi Sai Baba, the Boga Siddhar of Palani; there was even a book in Tamil on Abraham Lincoln! There were “Notes on Cooking” available too. The shopkeeper had on display pictures of gods from the Hindu pantheon, and they were selling like hot cakes.

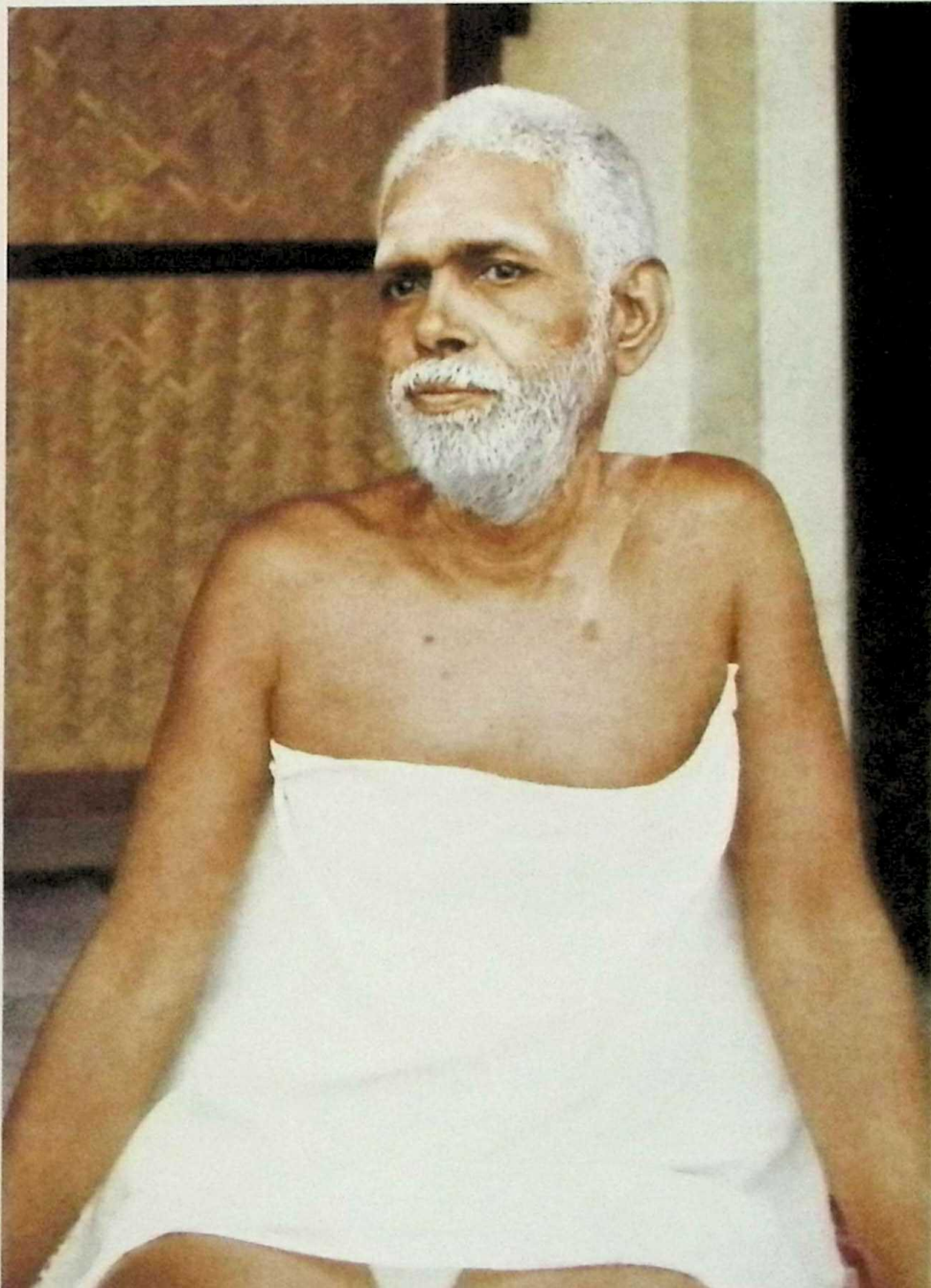
Young M. Marimuthu of K.K. Nagar, Madurai, was leafing through one of the books when this writer struck up a conversation with him. Marimuthu has been doing *girivalam* for the past three years on every full moon day. He would come down from Madurai to Tiruvannamalai for his peregrination. He said, “It is *Easun* who has incarnated himself as the Arunachala hill here. First, Siva appeared as a towering column of light and then that *agni pizhambu* [which is Siva] manifested



• The Arunachala hill, with the shadow of a cloud over it.

— PHOTO: SURESH MENON, SRI RAMANASRAMAM

■ PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM



itself here as the sacred mountain. So even if you do not visit temples but do *girivalam*, you will collect a lot of merit (*punyam*). And if you do *girivalam* at night on a full moon day, the moon's rays will fall on you and it is good for your health." Asked about the purpose behind his religiously doing the *girivalam* every full moon day for the past three years, he responded, "I do it for world peace."

Marimuthu said he would sometimes do *girivalam* of 11 hills which includes the hill at Pillayarpatti, Piran Malai, Tapasu Malai and so on, in the Sivaganga district. "The distance to be covered is 50 km to 100 km and we will take a full day to it," he said.

Another pilgrim named Subadevan said he performed the *pradakshina* of the Arunachala Hill, praying for "plenty of rains this year and the welfare of my family and country." K.P. Arasu, an engineering contractor, looked deadpan at first but broke into a smile when this writer explained to him why he was being interviewed. "I do *girivalam* for my peace of mind," he said.

Radhammal of Kuppam, Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh, was frank. She said she was doing *girivalam* with the prayer that her son should get remarried. He was a divorcee and the court proceedings were just over.

"I am doing *girivalam* for the

• An aerial view of
the Arunachleswarar
temple complex
with its soaring nine
gopuras and a vimana.

— PHOTO:

C. VENKATACHALAPATHY







• A bird's-eye view of the Arunachaleswarar temple.

- PHOTOS:
C. VENKATCHALAPATHY

past 15 years," said the handsome K. Purushotham from Hyderabad, Telangana, an online financial consultant, who is an MBA from Osmania University. "Not only does it provide exercise to the body but it is good for your spiritual energy." His mother was doing the *pradakshina* with him.

There were other shops - those selling tender coconut, water bottles, etc. There was a scrimmage for steaming idlis with chutney, sold from a shop set up on a push-cart. It was parked strategically near the Dakshinamurthy shrine, where hundreds of devotees doing the *pradakshina* congregate to pray. For Dakshinamurthy is Siva teaching in silence and that is Arunachala. On the 14 km circuit, there are several temples, shrines, ashrams, *mantapas* and sacred tanks. Starting from the Arunachaleswara temple, they include the Agni Teertham, the Seshadri Swamigal ashram, the Dakshinamurthy shrine, the Sri Ramanasramam, Draupadi temple, Simha Teertham, Unnamulai Amman *mantapa*, Gautama ashram, Pachaiyamma temple, Ezhuthu Mantapam and so on. Pilgrims visit these temples or take rest near these *mantapas*.

The Dakshinamurthy shrine, on the edge of the road always draws a lot of devotees. After devotees have a *darshan* of Dakshinamurthy, they visit the temple

dedicated to Seshadri Swamigal and Sri Ramanasramam.

Sri Ramana Maharshi loved the hill so much that he not only wandered about it a few times a day, but constantly did *girivalam* with a group of his seekers. They would begin their circumambulation at night and complete it by early morning the next day. Sometimes, there would be informed talks and discussions on different topics at the *mantapas* or the sacred tanks



• (Right) Devotees on a *girivalam* on a full moon day.

- PHOTOS:
C. VENKATCHALAPATHY



where they took rest. When Ramana stayed in the Virupaksha cave from 1899 to 1916, he and a group of his disciples set out on *giripradakshina* on a full moon day when the moonlight was bright. A symposium was held "while on the move". The first lecture given by Ramanatha Brahmachari was on "The similarity in the Paramatma dwelling in the cave of the human heart, Lord Nataraja of Chidambaram and Sri Ramana in the Virupaksha cave." The

frail-looking Ramanatha Brahmachari dazzled everybody with his scholarship on this obtuse subject for three hours.

According to Arthur Osborne, Ramana "always encouraged *pradakshina* of the hill. Even in the case of the old and the infirm, he would not discourage it but only tell them to go slowly. Indeed, the *pradakshina* is to be made slowly "like a pregnant queen in her ninth month."" (Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge.)

POLYCHROMATIC PHANTASMAGORIA

(Top): The nine *gopuras* of the Arunchaleswarar temple ablaze with multi-coloured bulbs during the *Karthigai Deepam* festival.

(Below, right). A "sugarcane cradle" for a boon sought, during the festival.- PHOTOS:

C. VENKATACHALAPATHY



WHO AM I ?



Bhagavan's many hidden facets

A glimpse into Sri Ramana Maharshi's personality, his creativity and his understanding of the Atman

▪ T. S. S. ▪



On the inside wall above the threshold of the storeroom at the premises of the Sri Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai, is an aesthetic piece of masonry workmanship, giving an insight into the multifaceted persona of Sri Ramana Maharshi. It is a stucco bas relief of his favourite subject - the Arunachala hill. Ramana played a major role in creating this work of art when the masons did not know how to go about it.

Once a journalist, forever a journalist. It was Dev Gogoi, a former journalist

and a sincere devotee of Ramana, who alerted us to the existence of this piece of Ramana's portrayal of the Arunachala hill, with its peaks, spurs and valleys, in stucco. R. Rajamani, the storekeeper, enthusiastically explains how the stucco piece was done. When the masons were building the storeroom, they wanted to create a stucco artwork of the Arunachala hill on the inside wall above the threshold. But they did not know how to go about it. So Ramana drew its outline on the wall and helped them in creating it. "He was very much involved in getting it done," Rajamani says.

• THE LANDSCAPE ARTIST:

A beautiful ink sketch by Ramana of the Arunachala hill, with temples and paddy fields, done on his disciple Kunju Swamy's notebook.

COURTESY:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM





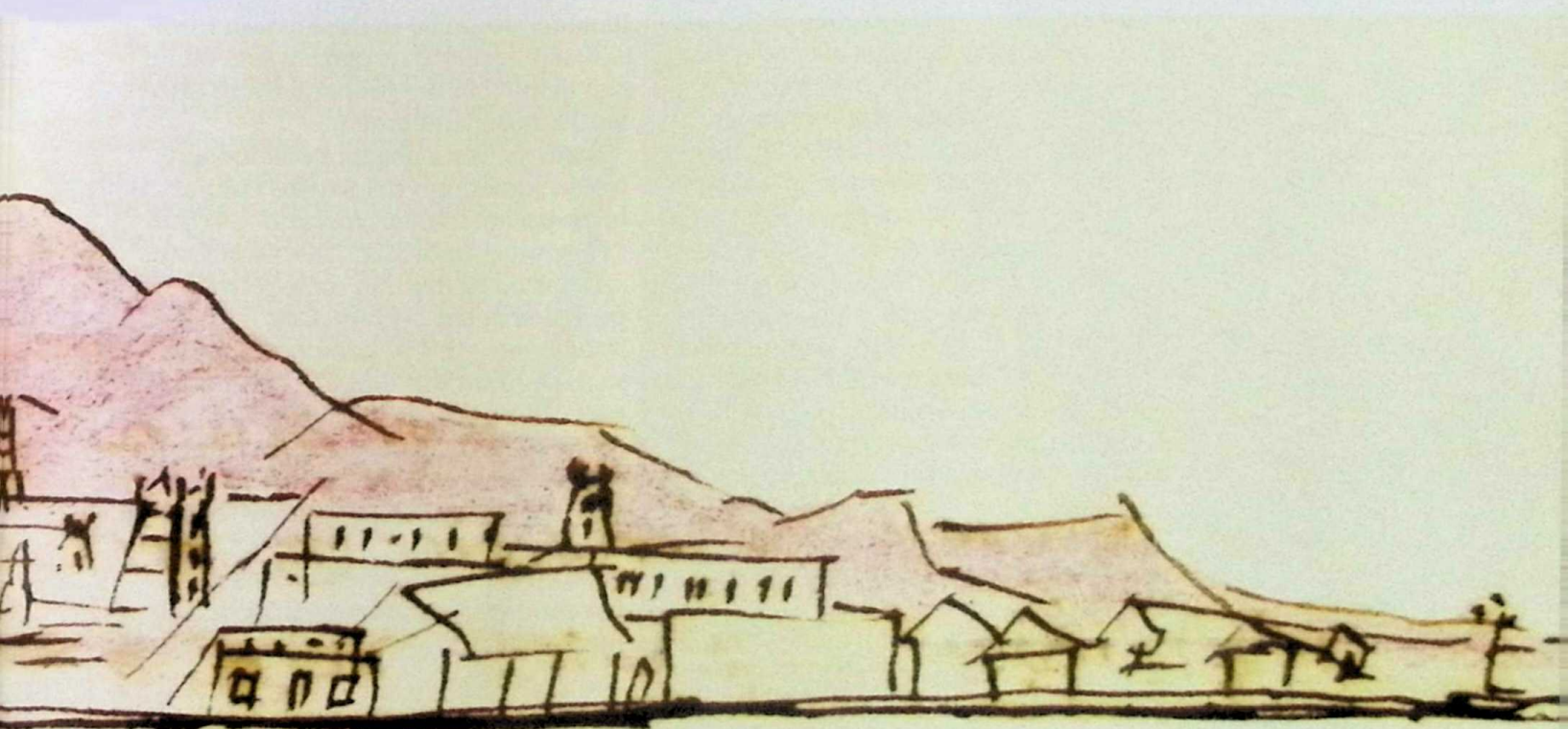
Dev Gogoi, who has been living in Tiruvannamalai for the past 31 years, chips in. "You can see the outline of the Arunachala hill," he says, pointing to the stucco relief above. "Any depiction of the hill is incomplete without the depiction of the *deepam* on the top. This is how particular Bhagavan was, down to the smallest detail. If grains of [uncooked]

rice were lying in the kitchen, he would pick them up himself and hand them over in the storeroom. When he finished eating from the banana leaf, it would look like a new leaf. Nothing would be wasted."

Ramana adored the hill so much that he drew two pen sketches of the hill too. The sketches show his deft touch

• **STUCCO ARTIST: (Top)**
Sri Ramana Maharshi played an important role in making these masonry stucco works of the Arunachala hill, with its peaks and a *deepam* on its summit, in the store room of the ashram.

- PHOTOS:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

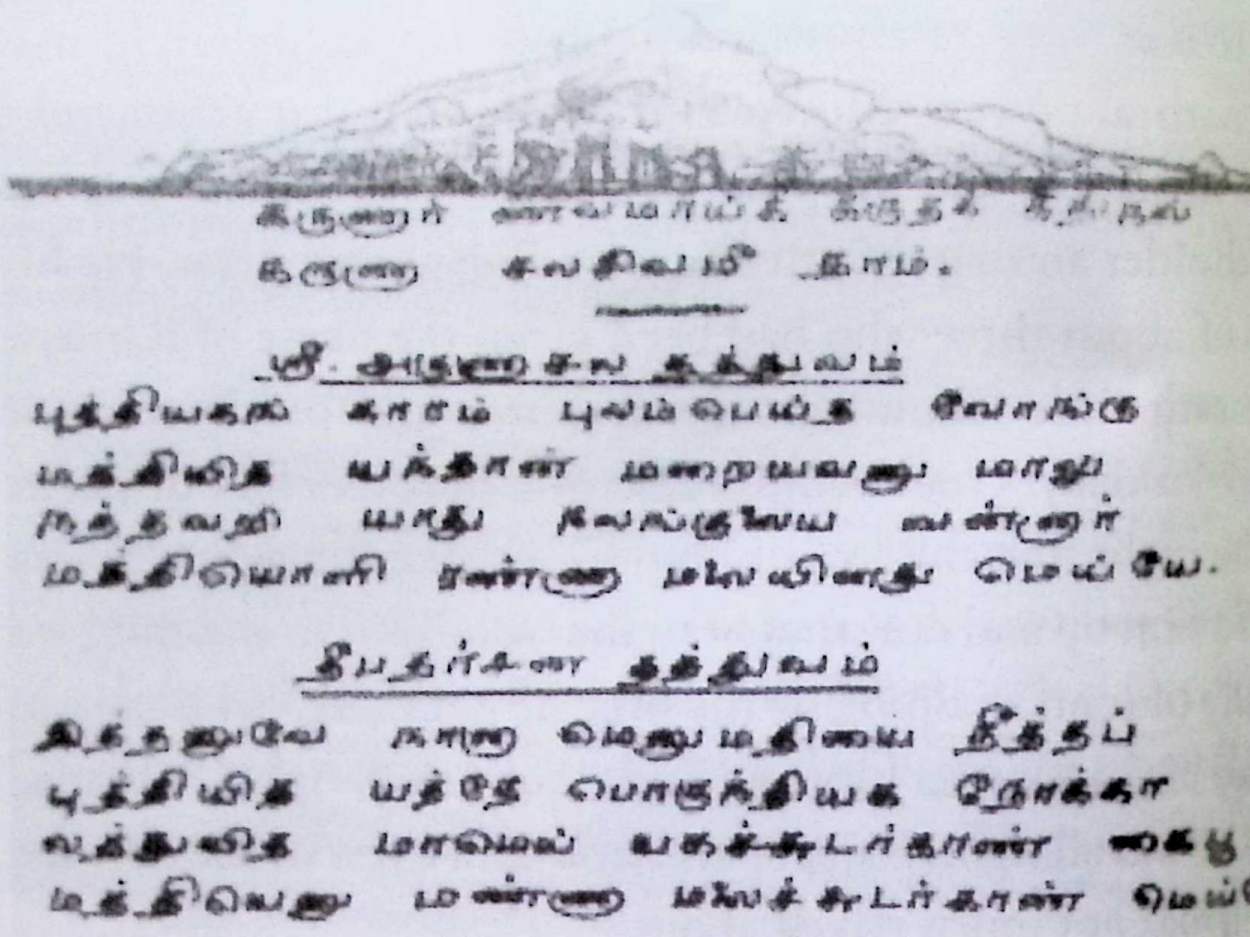


• PAINTER AND POET:

The ink sketch of the Arunachala hill done by Ramana and the poem he composed in Tamil and wrote in his hand on the philosophy of Arunachala and the *Karthigai Deepa darshan*.

~ PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM



and attention to detail. They portray the hill with its peaks, the Arunachaleswara temple with its *gopuras*, the residential houses, paddy fields interspersed with coconut trees and so on.

In his book *Ramana Periya Puranam*, V. Ganesan, Ramana's grandnephew, writes how the Maharshi drew the ink-sketch of the hill on the notebook of Sivananda Swami, a loyal attendant of Ramana for many years. Ganesan says, "Bhagavan called out to Sivanandam and said, 'Bring me your notebook.' Sivanandam brought the notebook that Bhagavan had given him. Bhagavan kept the notebook for a couple of hours, and then opening the notebook to a particular page, asked Sivanandam, 'Where is the doubt? Are you satisfied?' Bhagavan was pointing to a sketch of Arunachala that he himself had drawn because Sivanandam had a doubt whether Bhagavan was Arunachala or not. Sivanandam was delighted to receive this clarification." Ramana drew a second ink-sketch of the hill for Kunju Swami, a devotee.

In the book *Be As You Are, The Teachings*

of Sri Ramana Maharshi that he edited, David Godman says, "His [Ramana's] love for the mountain was so great that from the day he arrived in 1896 until his death in 1950, he could never be persuaded to go more than two miles from its base." Coming back to the ashram kitchen, Ramana would be in the kitchen from 3.30 a.m. every day, cutting vegetables and helping in the preparation of dishes for breakfast and lunch.

Ramana was a master cook too and would sometimes display his culinary skill in preparing *sambar*, *rasam* or *poriyal*. "They were ambrosia," Dev Gogoi says.

It was an egalitarian society that prevailed in the ashram. Gogoi remembers, "Every person who came to the ashram was equal in Bhagavan's eyes. There was no junior or senior, favoured or unfavoured. All were equal to one another. The reason behind this was that from the point of view of *atman*, everybody is equal."

On an occasion, when he asked for a second helping of buttermilk during lunch, Ramana found that the buttermilk

he was served the second time was inferior in quality to what he had received first. This second helping which was for others, had been watered down. From then on, the Maharishi ensured that the same kind of buttermilk was served to everyone including himself, at all times.

A similar incident occurred with coffee and Bhagavan stopped drinking coffee. Whether it was fruits, bars of chocolates or a bottle of *Chyawanprash lehiyam* that devotees presented to him, it was equally shared with those present.

Ramana never preached morals. There was no religion behind his core teachings. Nobody was asked to believe in anything. There was no indoctrination.

As David Godman says, "As the years passed, he became more and more famous. A community grew around him, thousands of visitors flocked to see him. For the last twenty years of his life, he was regarded as India's most popular and revered holy man. Some of these thousands were attracted by the peace they felt in his presence, others by the authoritative way in which he guided spiritual seekers and interpreted religious teachings, and some merely came to tell him their problems. Whatever their reasons for coming, almost everyone who came into contact with him was impressed by his simplicity and his humility.

He made himself available to visitors 24 hours a day, by living and sleeping in a communal hall which was always accessible to everyone. His only private possessions were a loincloth, a water pot and a walking stick. Although he was worshipped by thousands as a living God, he refused to allow anyone to treat him as a special person. He always refused to accept anything which could not be shared equally by everyone in his ashram..."

• **SUN-DAPPLED:** Light and shade play on Sri Ramana Maharshi in this picture.

– PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM



WHO AM I ?



The mysterious book bundle

An interesting incident in the life of Sri Ramana Maharshi

▪ T. S. S. ▪

*A*n interesting incident happened in the life of Sri Ramana Maharshi when he was staying in the Virupaksha cave from 1899 to 1916. But it does not find mention in many of his biographies. When he was seated in the cave one day, a *sanyasin* who was a disciple of Sringeri Sankaracharya, arrived there.

He tried to convince Ramana into taking *sanyas*.

According K.S. Kannan, Office Manager, Sri Ramanasramam, the *sanyasin* from Sringeri, quoted from the scriptures to back his argument that the young Swamy should be initiated into *sanyas*, that he should give up wearing the white-coloured *koupinam* and take to ochre-coloured robes.



The *sanyasin* told the Swamy that since the latter was a Brahmin, he should follow the injunctions in the Sastras. He held forth for a few hours as to why the young Swamy should be formally initiated into *sanyas*.

He said he would make all the arrangements for the formal initiation if the Swamy agreed.

The Swamy listed to him but said "no". The Sringeri *sanyasin* would not relent. He gave an ultimatum to the young Swamy: the former would go to town and return after an hour. By then, Ramana should have made up his mind. So the Sringeri sadhu made for the Tiruvannamalai town.

When Ramana was seated alone now, a person looking like a rustic arrived there with a *moottai* (a big bundle) of books.

He put down the bundle near Ramana and told him that he had to go elsewhere and would return after an hour. "Will you please keep an eye on this bundle?" the villager asked Ramana. Both the Sringeri sadhu and the rustic did not

return for several hours. Ramana's eyes fell on a book called *Arunachala Mahatmiyam* (*The Glory of the Arunachala Hill*) in the bundle. Pulling it out, he turned the pages and happened to read a *sloka*.

He noted down the *sloka* on a piece of paper. Then Ramana closed his eyes and sank into meditation.

When he opened his eyes, the bundle of books was gone. The villager was not to be seen.

When the Sringeri sadhu returned, Ramana showed him the *sloka*. It said, "Those living within a radius of three *yojanas* [a distance of 30 miles] from the holy Arunanachala hill, do not require to be given *thettai*/initiation. Yet, they will attain Liberation."

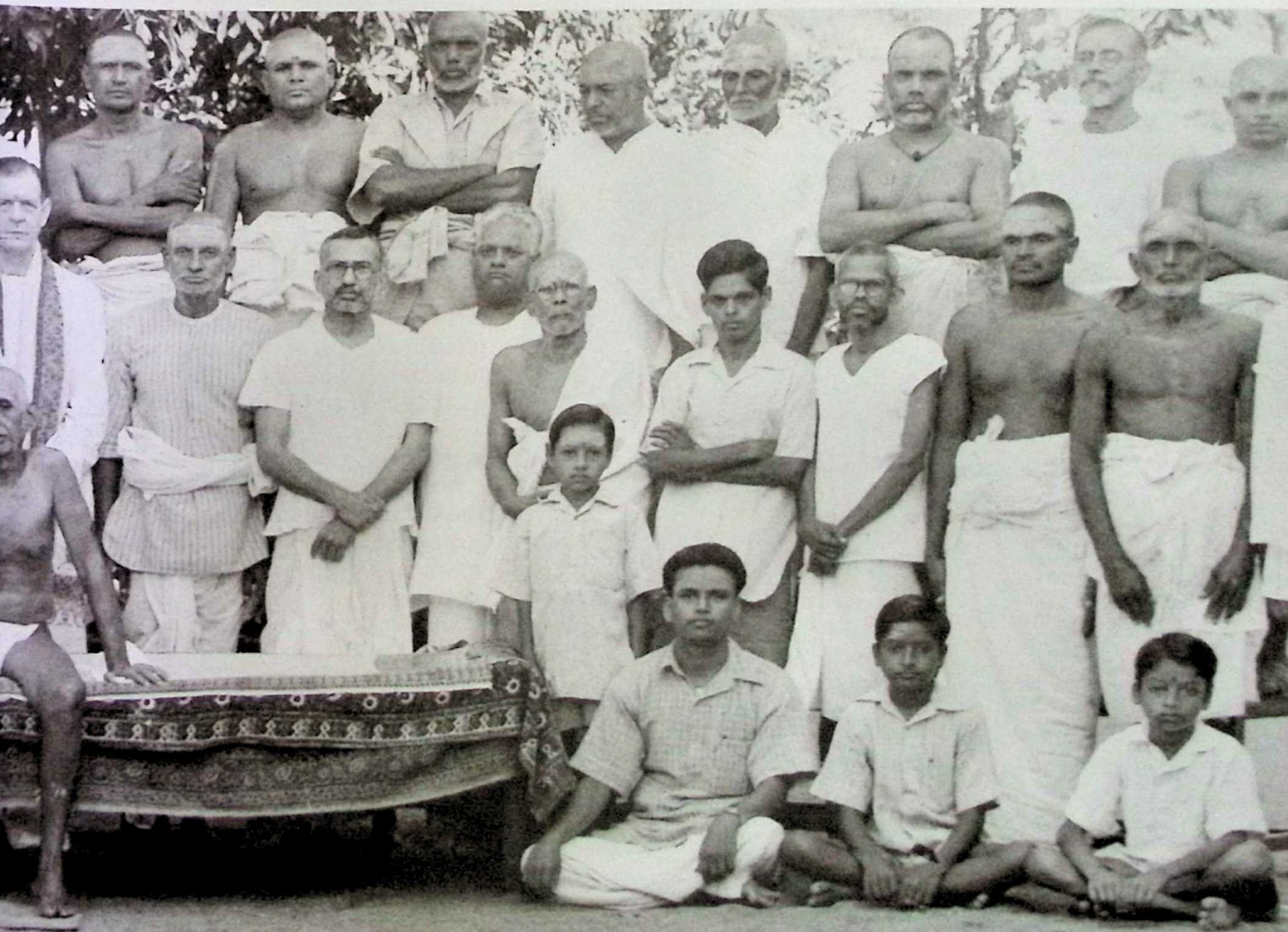
The sadhu went back to Sringeri and told the Sankaracharya of Sringeri Mutt about the incident.

The Sankaracharya told the sadhu that the Maharshi was an *Athyashrami*, i.e., he was beyond all *ashramas* and that he should not be controlled by such rules, said Kannan, concluding the narrative.

• **A BIG GROUP:** The last group picture taken with the Maharshi in 1948. Behind Bhagavan is A.W. Chadwick. Fourth from the left, seated, is Swami Niranjanananda, his son T.N. Venkataraman, TNV's children, V.S. Ramanan, V. Ganesan and V. Subramanian (standing behind).

— PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM





When all life is to be loved

*Sri Ramana Maharshi had a unique
and special connect with animals and
the environment around him*

▪ T. S. S. ▪



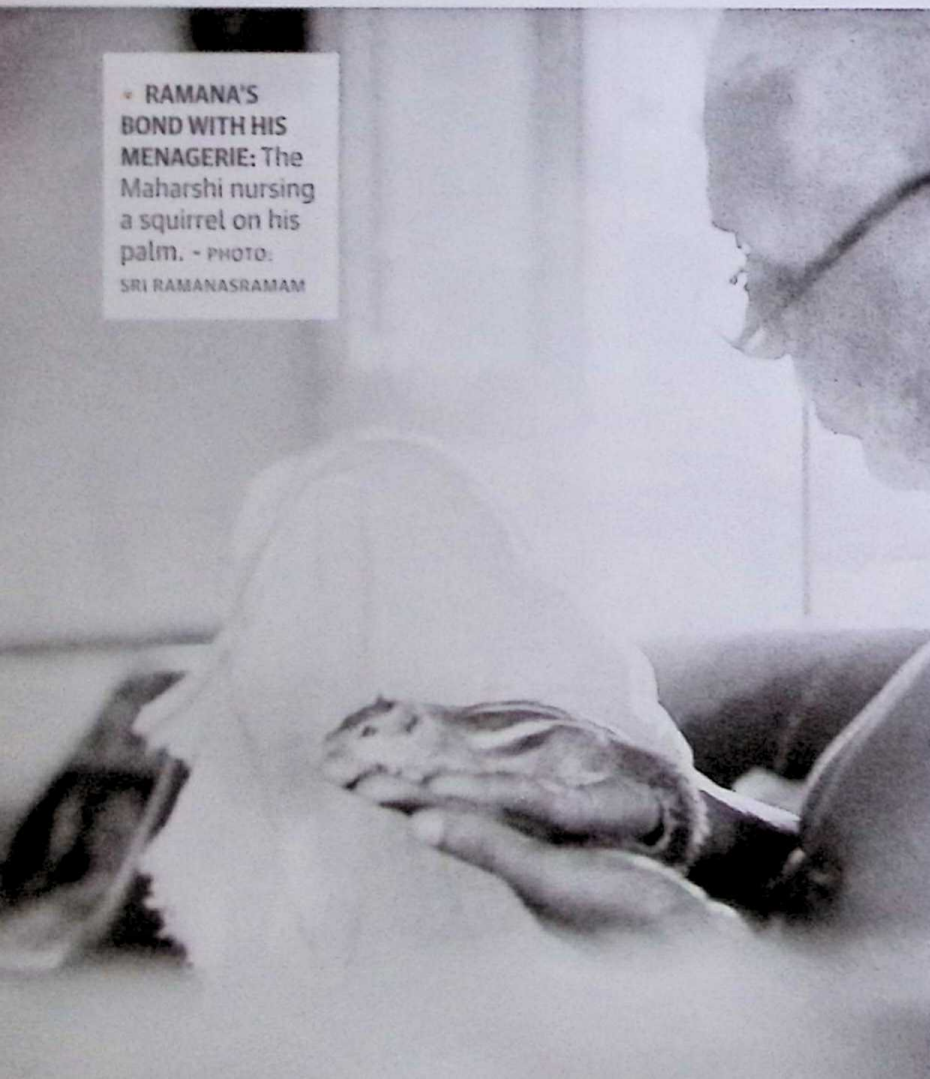
ri Ramana Maharshi's love for animals adds an interesting dimension to his fascinating personality. His biographers have documented it extensively. He had a way with animals. He could forge a special bond with them, whether they were cows, calves, dogs, monkeys, squirrels, sparrows, rabbits, peacocks

and peahens. On a couple of occasions, he handled cobras with poise. The animals too uncannily singled him out for their affection. Sometimes, woodcutters presented him with orphaned cheetah cubs. The Rani of Baroda gifted him a white peacock and a few white peahens. The Maharaja of Mysore presented him with tiger and deer skins.

In the Old Hall where the Maharshi lived for 20 years on a cement concrete bench, he had a menagerie around him. The cow, Lakshmi, would take the most liberty with him. She was his pet. He would be often seen talking to her. Lakshmi would walk into the Old Hall, where Ramana would be seated on the couch, observing silence or answering questions of the devotees on spiritual matters. Sometimes, she would make off with a bunch of bananas presented to Ramana. She came to the ashram as a calf in 1926 and Ramana named her Lakshmi. She was attached to him and would display her affection for him.

According to Dev Gogoi, a devotee of the Maharshi, other than his mother, Azhagammal, it was the cow, Lakshmi, to whom Ramana granted *moksha* or liberation.

Suri Nagamma, an academic-minded devotee of Ramana, gave an account of Lakshmi attaining *mukti*. She said Bhagavan headed straight to Lakshmi in the cow shed and sat by her side on the hay. Suri Nagamma said: "He then tenderly lifted her head with both his



▪ RAMANA'S
BOND WITH HIS
MENAGERIE: The
Maharshi nursing
a squirrel on his
palm. - PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

hands and placed it on his thighs. He gently passed one hand over her face and then her throat. Next, he placed his left hand on her head and with the fingers of his right hand, began pressing from her throat down to her heart. Lakshmi remained calm, free from the ties of the world and free from pain, as though she were in a state of *samadhi*." (From V. Ganesan's *Ramana Periya Puranam*.) Later when Suri Nagamma informed the Maharshi that Lakshmi had attained *mukti*, he came to the cowshed, lifted her head with both his hands and cried, "Lakshmi, Lakshmi." On the last day of her life, Ramana, looking at her, asked the devotees present there, "Did you notice that her right ear is raised?" There was a belief, he said, that when people died in Varanasi (Kasi), Lord Siva whispered into their right ear and liberated them. So Lakshmi too had attained *moksha*.

A memorial was built for Lakshmi on the ashram premises and Ramana wrote the epitaph for her in Tamil verse. Many ashramites believed that "Keerai Patti" (the granny of the greens), who used to cook greens, pulses and rice for the Maharshi and bring them to him when he was staying in the Virupaksha cave, was reborn as Lakshmi.

When Ramana picked a towel from a rack where a sparrow had built her nest, an egg fell down and developed cracks. He grieved over the incident, mended the cracks using various methods and when a chick emerged from the egg later, his cup of joy overflowed.

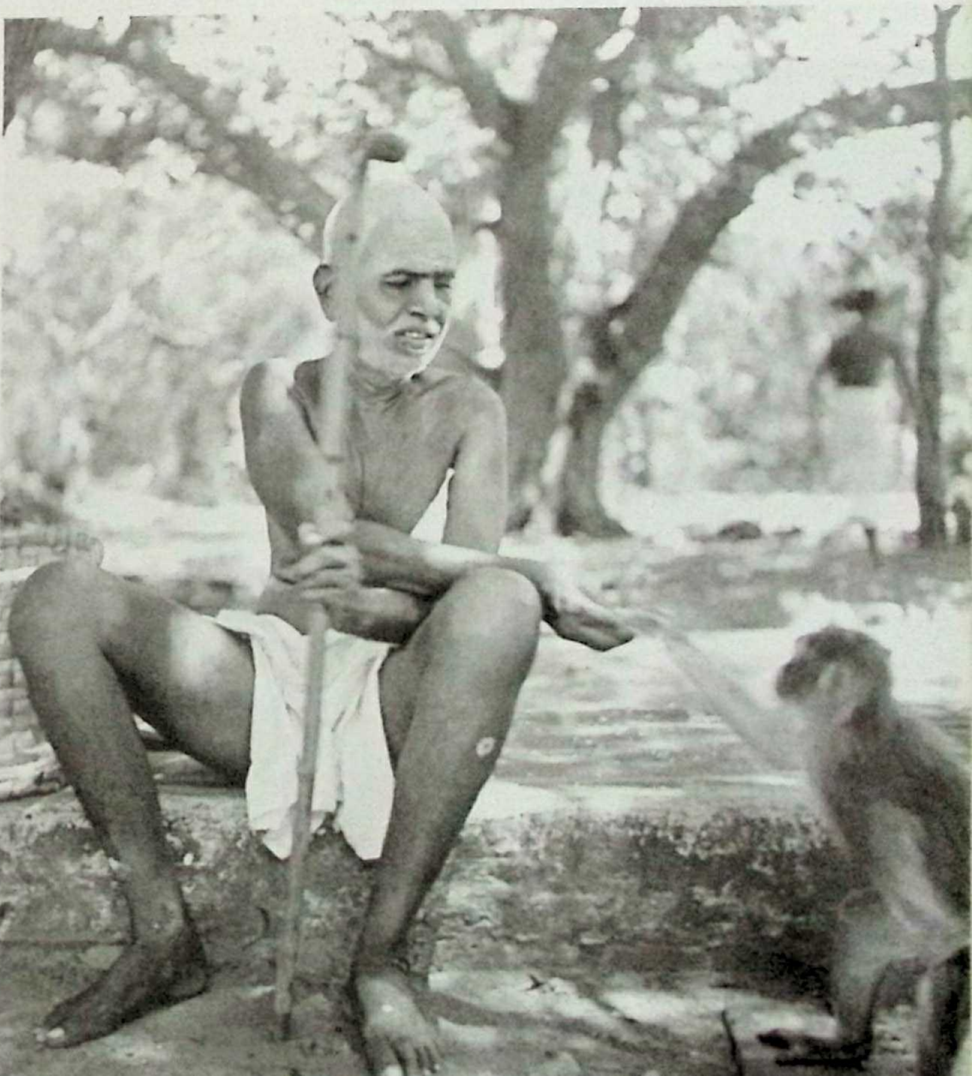
The ashram had a retinue of dogs including Jack, Kamala, Chinna Karuppan, Rose and Segappan. Ramana was particular about their food, cleanliness and bed, and never tolerated the ashramites being rude to them. Some of these dogs acted as guides to new devotees. "Kamala, take this new man around," he would tell her and Kamala would take him to every shrine, sacred tank and *mantapa* on the hill and bring him back.

When Kamala conceived for the first time, she was given a bath, and turmeric paste and vermillion were applied on her forehead. After she delivered the litter, she was given a bath, a purification



★ **WATER DIVINER AND ANIMAL LOVER:** (Top) When drought stalked Tiruvannamalai, Ramana used a stick to scratch a few lines on the soil near the Old Hall in the ashram and suggested that a well be dug there. To this day, the well is yielding perennial water.

- PHOTO: T.S. SUBRAMANIAN (Bottom) Ramana knew the ways of monkeys.





• **(Top)** The Maharshi loved Lakshmi: Other than his mother, Azhagammal, Ramana gave *moksha* to only cow Lakshmi. Here, he is coaxing her to have a bath. **(Bottom left)** Ramana with Lakshmi. **(Bottom right)**. Jackie, the dog, going ahead of Ramana on the hill. - PHOTOS: SRI RAMANASRAMAM

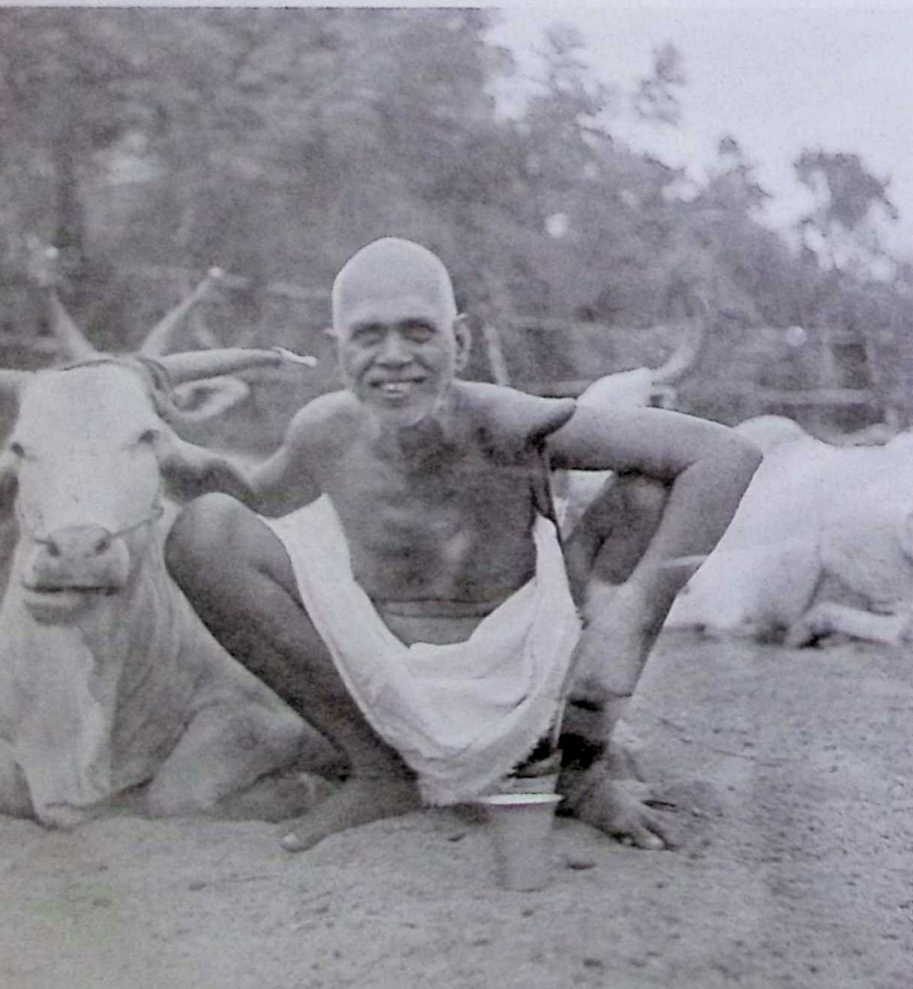
ceremony was held and a feast was organised, with sweets and *payasam* served.

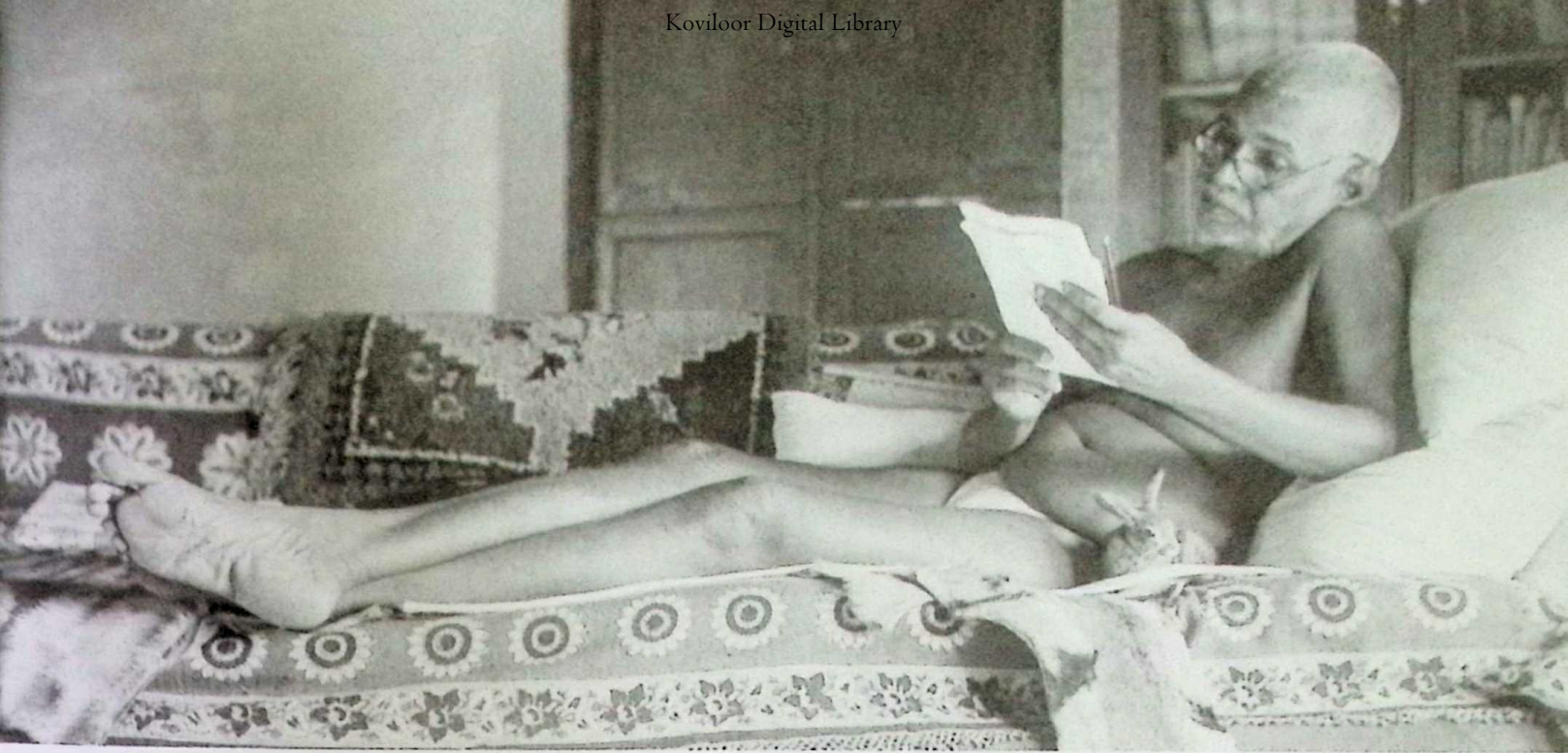
On a night, when Ramana went out, a rabid dog sprang on him and started licking him all over his body. The Maharshi patiently allowed him to lick him to his heart's content. It was clear that the dog, with sores all over his body, was conveying his intense love for Ramana. Finally, the Maharshi got up and asked the dog, "*Porumada?* ['Is it enough?' in Tamil]. Can I go now?" The dog was found dead the next day. (From V. Ganesan's *Purushottama Ramana*, 2013, published by Sri Ramanasramam.)

On another occasion, a dog was constantly barking at night just outside the hall where Ramana and others were lying down. He asked the ashramites to give it some food. After the dog ate the food, it bounded away.

The Maharshi commented that a *siddha* living on the hill was feeling hungry and so he took the form of a dog to have some food and go away.

During his stay in the Virupaksha cave and Skandasramam on the hill from 1899 to 1922, the Maharshi studied in





detail the behaviour of monkeys, how they formed their own groups, how each group had its chief, how the groups had territorial divisions, how they settled their disputes and so on.

Sometime after the Maharshi had relocated from Skandasramam on the hill to the present location towards the end of 1922, an old monkey, who was the chief of a group, and his queens - were crying loudly outside the hall where the Bhagavan was staying.

The monkeys were friends with Bhagavan during his Skandasramam days and they missed him after he moved to the present site.

They found out where he was staying and came there to see him. Ramana came out and told the old monkey, "Thatha [grandfather], what to do? I have to stay here. You and your queens have come down here from your territory to see me, risking attacks from

other monkeys who stay here. Please go back with your wives safely."

Ramana once said that the strategy involved in handling cobras was to look into their eyes and convey to them the impression that you mean no harm.

Ramana's ability to divine water came to light during a debilitating drought which prevailed for a couple of years in Tiruvannamalai in the early 1930s. The north-east monsoon had failed and there was water scarcity in the ashram.

The Maharshi picked a piece of stick and drew a couple of lines on the barren ground near the Old Hall (now the Meditation Hal). He asked the ashram officials to dig a well there. To this day, the well has never dried up. In October 2019, the well had plenty of water. "It is a perennial source of water", notes K.S. Kannan, office manager, Sri Ramanasramam, who narrates the incident to this writer.

• (Top) A rabbit feeling at home with Sri Ramana Maharshi. (Bottom left) The memorial for cow Lakshmi on the ashram premises with a sculpture of her and the requiem written in Tamil by Sri Ramana Maharshi. (Bottom, right, from left) Memorial for Valli, the deer; "the blessed crow"; Jackie, the dog; and the cow, Lakshmi.

- PHOTOS:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM,
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN AND
T.S. SUBRAMANIAN

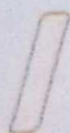




"Bhagavan was not his body at all"

*Interview with Ilayaraaja,
music composer and devotee*

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪



Ilayaraaja, the prodigious music composer, rarely agrees to give interviews. But he readily agreed to talk to *The Hindu Publishing Group* on Sri Ramana Maharshi who has been his spiritual guru for the past several decades. The leitmotif through the interview is Ilayaraaja's assertion that Bhagavan (as Sri Ramana Maharshi is addressed by his devotees) had no body at all. He was formless. "He had a body but he did not live as a *dehi*," the music composer asserts.

He advances arguments to underscore his repeated observations that Bhagavan "is not a *dehi* at all." His devotion to Maharshi is such that he says, "Bhagavan is Bhagavan. He is *Paramporul* [the entity which is beyond everything]. He is *Sarveswaran* - the Omnisient," he says.

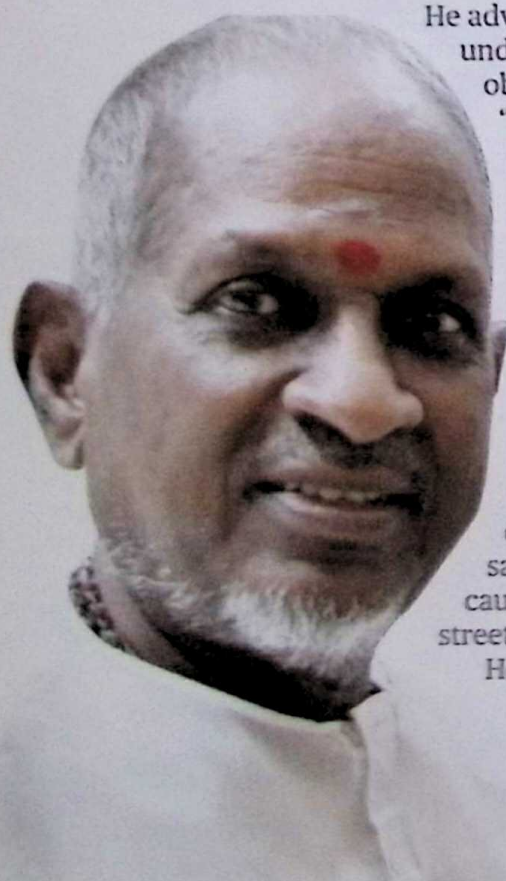
On a personal note, Ilayaraaja, switching over to English from Tamil during the interview, says: "It was Bhagavan who caught me... (I was) just a street dog, fallen into a ditch. He took care of me with his two fingers - not with a full hand, but

with his two fingers, took me out, put me down and he is gone. That is all I can say. He brought me here [to Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai]. I did not come (by myself)." He adds that "...it is a very big matter" to describe how the Maharshi brought him to the ashram, that is, how he became Ramana's devotee.

Seventy-six-year-old Ilayaraaja's devotion to Ramana is such that he has written many songs in praise of the Maharshi, sung them himself and composed mellifluous music for them. They have been produced in the form of an album. Some of the songs which have drawn wide appreciation are titled, "Bhikshaipaathiram", "Sutrugira Ulgathile", "Arunachala Siva", "Vinnor Thozhum" and so on. He has written a book in Tamil titled, *Ramana Amudhu* which reveals his nuanced understanding of the life and teachings of Ramana.

One of the greatest music composers that India has produced, Ilayaraaja's work is stupendous. He has composed music for more than 7,000 songs, produced music tracks for about 1,000 films in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Marathi, and performed more than 20,000 concerts. He is a music composer, song writer, singer, instrumentalist, harmonium player and more. He was the first Asian to compose a symphony (Symphony No.1) with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, London.

• Music maestro, Ilayaraaja, who is a committed devotee of Sri Ramana Maharshi. - PHOTO: S. R. RAGHUNATHAN



In his youth, he passed the classical guitar (higher local) examination conducted by the Trinity College of Music, London, with a gold medal and honours. In 2005, he composed and orchestrated select verses from *Thiruvvasagam*, a Tamil devotional poetic work composed by the eighth century Saiva saint-poet, Manickavasagar, in the form of an oratorio. It became the first Indian literary work to receive this kind of musical treatment. Ilaiyaraaja hit upon the concept of producing a symphony orchestra package for *Thiruvvasagam* while he was at Tiruvannamalai, his favourite pilgrim town (*Frontline*, July 29, 2005).

The interview with Ilaiyaraaja which took place in the premises of Sri Ramanasramam, began with a prefatory address in Tamil by him. He then answered questions in Tamil, speaking in English occasionally.

■ Excerpts from the conversation:

In Ilaiyaraaja's words: Bhagavan cannot be compared with other *yogis* and *siddha purushas*. You should not do so as well. Why I am asserting this is that the moment he attained Self-realisation/Enlightenment, he did not live in his body from that moment onwards. Bhagavan was not his body. Is it not true that if Seshadri Swamigal had not seen him [in the underground vault of Patala Lingam shrine in the Arunachaleswara temple at Tiruvannamalai], he might have just passed on unnoticed? This is very important issue. This is *sathyam*. This is certainly the truth.

You imagine well now. All of us have crossed the age of 16. We are fully aware of what kind of thoughts we had at the age of 16, our behaviour at that time, what kind of relationship we had with our mother and family members, and the involvement we had in our activities. After Bhagavan attained Enlightenment at the age of 16, he never slipped from that state of Enlightenment even for a split second. He was the only person to do so in the entire world. I repeat, he was the only person to do so in the entire world. The reason behind my emphasising this is that we have heard of so many sages. However, this kind of

development [the question "Who Am I?" arising in them] did not occur in any of their lives. This development brooks no comparison at all.

When Sri Ramana Maharshi was in *tapas* [in the sanctum of the Patala Lingam shrine] and termites had built a mound around him and they were gnawing at him, if Seshadri Swamigal had not seen him there, Bhagavan could have remained unnoticed forever. Did Bhagavan come out to have food at that time? No. Did he emerge from the vault to finish his daily ablutions? He never came out. How was it possible?

All this are in contradiction to the normal practice of humans and Nature itself. They are beyond the ken of man's imagination. Not everybody can do this. Since Bhagavan continued in his state of Self-enquiry and Self-realisation and never slipped from it, he handled it with ease.

Much later, Annamalai Swamigal, who was driven by his sexual desires in his youth, could not bear them and was unable to take anybody into confidence about it, finally asked Bhagavan himself, "Did not thoughts of sex ever possess you?" Annamalai Swamigal was driven to putting this question to Bhagavan because sexual desires possessed Annamalai Swamigal so much at that young age. Bhagavan told him, "I transcended my body at the age of 16. Only if I had had a body then, those thoughts would have occurred to me. I did not have a body at all." That was the reply from Bhagavan.

What we should understand from this is that we have seen Bhagavan only in his physical form. We have not seen him sans his body. Does it mean that he did not possess a physical appearance? He had a body but he did not live as a *dehi*.

When his mother met him at Pavazhakkunru in 1898 after he had left home two years earlier and pleaded with him to return home, he told his mother in writing in Tamil, "The ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their past deeds. Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try how hard you may be. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to stop it. This is certain. The

best course, therefore, is for one to be silent."

Bhagavan, who sent back his mother without even talking a single word to her, later allows her to remain with him. What is the reason for this? For he is not a *dehi*. He is not a *dehi* at all. Nobody can say that his heart accepted his decision to allow his mother to stay with him later.

(In another incident), people are telling him to sign a will that they had drafted. He angrily throws the pen on the paper on which the will had been written. Did not a line form on that paper? Is it not clear from that line that he did not draw it with involvement and with *sankalp*? For he had said a thousand times that he had no name at all. "I do not know what name I have. How do I sign?" he had asked. When his devotees would request him, with affection and endearment, to give them his signature, he would tell them, "I do not know what name I have. How do I give you my signature?" He is, therefore, not a *dehi*.

Those who have seen Bhagavan are not people who have really seen him. At the same time, those who have not seen him are not people who have not seen him. He provides you with this certainty. For the experiences that Bhagavan has bestowed on his devotees - he gives them the feeling that he is providing them with these experiences without his appearing to do so - they look as if they are occurring on their own and the devotees surrender to him.

After he gave up his body in 1950 and merged into a *jyoti* on the peak of the Annamalai hill, it is that *Paramporul* [the entity who is beyond everything] which is drawing us towards him. If this is happening to us, we should realise how much merit - *punyam* - we have collected in our lives and we feel that we should forever be lying at his feet. No other thought occurs to us. Bhagavan himself has remarked once that the universe originates from him.

Sundaram alias Triveni Swamigal was doing some chores in the kitchen along with Bhagavan in the morning. Bhagavan suddenly tells him, "Sundaram, you stop cutting the vegetables, go and collect the mangoes that have fallen from

the mango tree and bring them here." Sundaram says "Yes" but starts cutting the vegetables again. Then Bhagavan tells him, "Sundaram, you first do what I tell you to do. For you should realise that the entire universe takes its birth from me. Do first what I tell you to do." From that day onwards, Sundaram Swamigal would immediately do whatever Bhagavan tells him to do.

Another time in the kitchen, the rice has boiled fully in a big vessel. It is about to get singed and stick to the vessel's inner bottom. Bhagavan comes to know that the rice would get scorched. He tells Sundaram to bring the vessel down from the fire. But Sundaram does not have any piece of cloth in his hand. He is aware that Bhagavan is in a tremendous hurry to get this job done. The vessel is searing hot. A single instruction from Bhagavan does not allow the *agni* to come anywhere near Sundaram. So how do we assess Bhagavan? How can we assess a person who does not come under any ken of estimate? We cannot measure Bhagavan at all.

I am fully aware that I neither have the qualification nor the status to pronounce even Bhagavan's name. Yet, I am hopeful that Bhagavan will bear with me because I do not have any option but to keep chanting his name. I am spending my life constantly reciting his name and chanting his *mantra*. Bhagavan is Bhagavan. What can I say more than this? You can ask me questions now.

■ You said Sri Ramana Maharshi was beyond his body...

I did not say that he was beyond his body. That is a wrong word to be used because only when you have a body, efforts are made to go beyond it. How can a person who has no body at all transcend it? Bhagavan was not a person who looks at everybody who comes in front of him in bodily form. He has no material body at all. He is a *jnani* non pareil. *Jnani* is a person who has no extraneous form at all. (Here Ilaiyaraaja switches to English). "It is being. That is being. It is not living." We all lead our lives. How can we, because of our narrow-minded thinking, impose that formula on Bhagavan? He lived his own

life. We look at him in bodily, physical form. Cancer struck him. Since he "showed an appearance" in the form of a body, he crossed whatever [physical discomforts] that the body should go through and had no body at all. Bhagavan was not his body at all. If it is not so, we will not feel his presence today. "I can feel his presence. He is here now. He is here now." (Ilaiyaraaja uses these English words.) In reply to a question from his devotees, Bhagavan observed that his *atma* was *prathyaksham* (i.e., it was apparent and obvious). I feel it every minute. Bhagavan is here and now as a *prathyaksha*.

■ **How were you attracted to Bhagavan?**

How can I be attracted to Bhagavan? It was Bhagavan who caught me. I am merely a street dog. (Switching over to English) "[I was] just a street dog, fallen into a ditch. He took care of me with his two fingers, not with the full hand but with his two fingers, took me out, put me down and he is gone. That is all I can say. He brought me here. I did not come." I did not have the motivation to come to Ramanasramam. He brought me here. The way he brought me here, I cannot describe it. It is a very big matter. It is one thing to receive an experience and describe those feelings with emotion. It is a different matter not to feel anything but do guess-work about those experiences and blabber about them. It cannot be explained but only experienced.

■ **Mr. V. Ganesan, the grand-nephew of Sri Ramana Maharshi, also said the same thing - that Bhagavan's grace should be experienced and that it cannot be explained.**

It is important to whom that experience occurred. There is no use at all when those, who have never gone through such an experience, tend to describe it and "brand" it.

■ **Of all teachings of Maharshi, such as "Who am I?", Self-enquiry, diving within and *Summa Iru* (be still), what attracted you the most?**



Our narrow-minded "*buddhi*" [mentality] forms the basis of the questions we ask. We do not ask questions that are based on the real experiences we go through. The question you have asked me is only for the sake of receiving a reply for the 'Press'. I have been facing this question from so many people and for many years. If I give a reply to such a question, does not the matter come to an end? Is it not, therefore, that you should not ask that question again? You are not going to understand it if you don't go through that experience. Will you not be justified if you were to ask me, "How far have you progressed in your self-enquiry of "who am I?" because I do not know all these myself."

... Say, somebody is coming to meet you. You frown on seeing him, wondering why he is coming there. But he does not harbour those thoughts. Only you frown on seeing him. So only your thoughts are evil for you. They are not evil for him at all. Evil does not accrue to you from others. You only

• Ilaiyaraaja, seated on the verandah of a building, where Sri Ramana Maharshi used to sit. On the right is the room which housed a sub-post office then. Behind this building is the *gosala*.

- PHOTO: S.R. RAGUNATHAN

think of it as evil. Don't look upon it as evil. Don't consider some hardship as suffering. They are part of life. Why do you think that your question is a "spiritual question" and ask me that question? If you were to ask me a real spiritual question, you will get a reply. Do the hardships that you encounter in your life affect your body, brain, heart or your intelligence? After a few days, you may not remember those hardships at all. Why do you waste your time thinking about your sufferings?

• Itaiyaraaja asserts that the Sage of Arunachala is formless. - PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

■ **Can you say something about Sri Ramana Maharshi?**

You ask the questions.

■ **Can you say something about your experiences related to Bhagavan?**

When Mahatma Gandhi was shot at, his death pangs lasted about 15 minutes.

When Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross, his pangs of death lasted for three days.

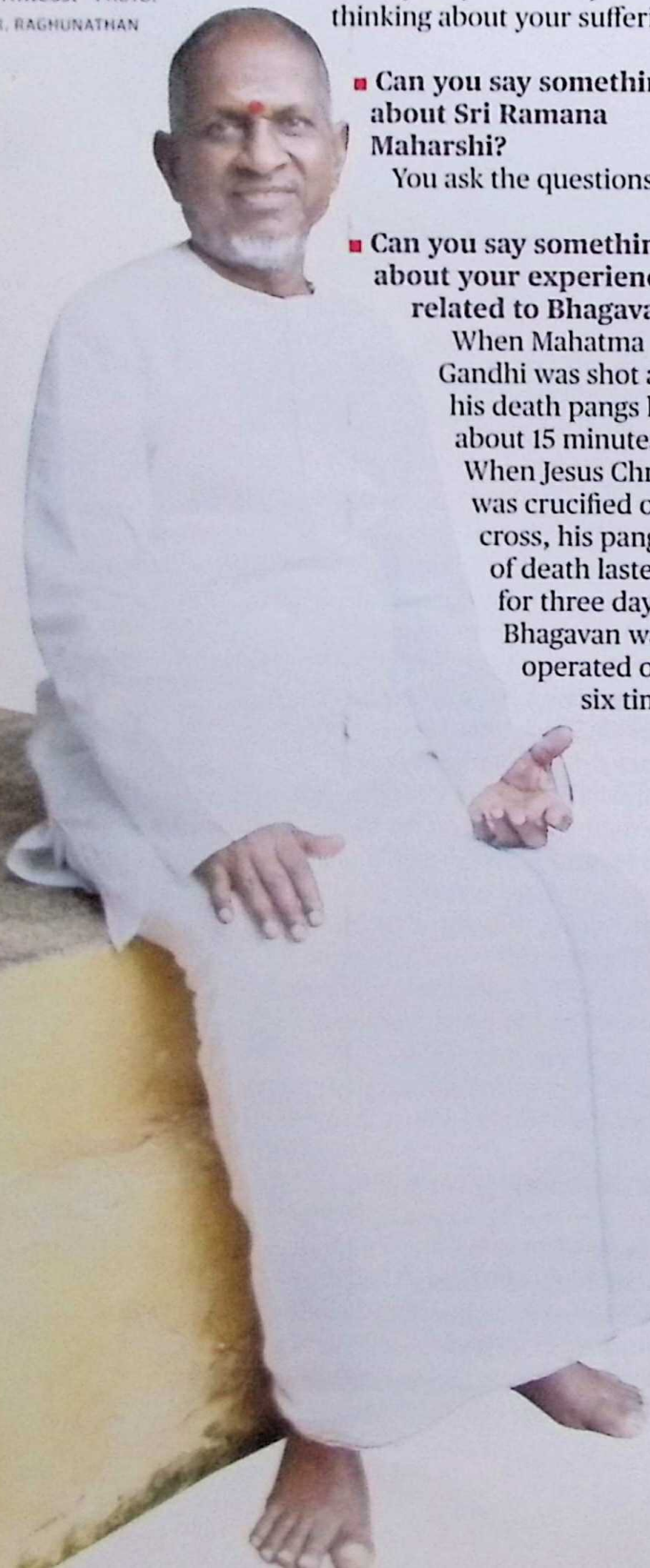
Bhagavan was operated on six times

[authoritative biographies say four times] without his being administered the general anaesthesia. Tiruchi Swamigal, who was a boy then, happens to watch the surgery all the six times. He has built a temple for goddess Bhuvaneswari in Bengaluru. He is aghast that Bhagavan is being operated upon. Tiruchi Swamigal has narrated what happened. He said: "There were six doctors then. They tell Bhagavan that he should be given anaesthesia. He wants to know why it should be administered to him. So that you will not feel the pain, the doctors tell him. He rejects anaesthesia, shows them the arm that should be operated on, and turns his face away. We looked at him. His face looks like a fresh lotus flower and there is not even a single wrinkle on his face".

Is this not evidence that Bhagavan was not his body at all? Is this not related to his telling Sundaram to collect the mangoes that were lying scattered under the mango tree and Bhagavan saying that the entire cosmos originates from him?

When Bhagavan was unable to walk and was laid up in bed, distraught devotees ask him, "O Bhagavan, are you going to depart from us? Can't you retain your bodily form for some more time? Can't you be with us?" Bhagavan replies, "Do you people look upon this six-foot tall body as Bhagavan?" He did not care for his body. He was unconcerned about it. When he departed from his body, a flood of light commingled with the Arunachala hill. His attitude towards his body was tantamount to his telling it, "There should be somebody to neglect you." He spent his life so naturally, casually and spontaneously, like the breeze, like the wind and like the very embodiment of Nature. Only we look at him in his bodily form.

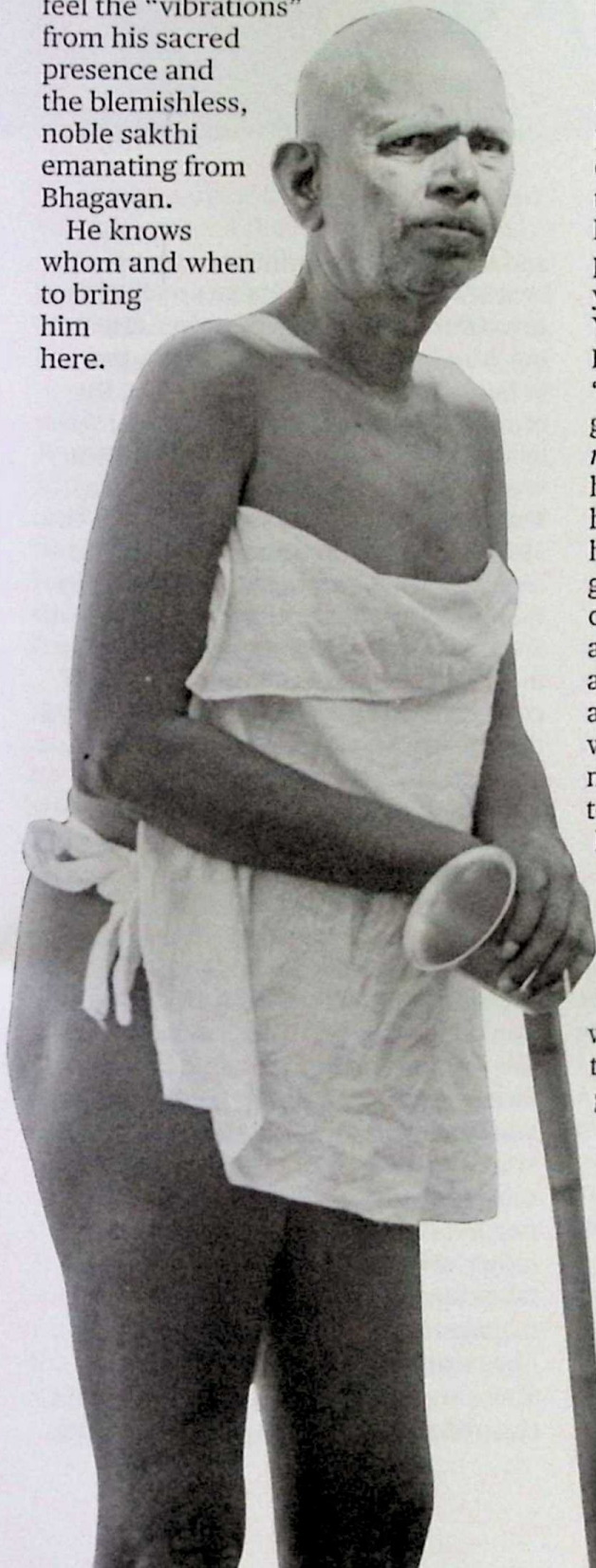
Since we look at him in his physical form, his devotees were overcome with unbearable grief when he attained *mukti*. When I stand before the shrine [called Ramaneswara Mahalingam, where his body was buried and a Sivalingam has been installed], I only visualise the great grief that would have prevailed when his body was being buried. You can imagine the great sorrow that his devotees would have felt when their only hope and the



God-incarnate guide in their lives had attained *mukti*. I am forever trying to feel the “vibrations” that the devotees would have felt at that time. Even when I attended the *arathi* in his shrine, I only remembered his devotees, who broke down and wept again and again when Bhagavan's body was being lowered into the earth.

The radiant holiness of Bhagavan and his presence prevail forever around me. More than these “feelings”, devotees feel the “vibrations” from his sacred presence and the blemishless, noble sakthi emanating from Bhagavan.

He knows whom and when to bring him here.

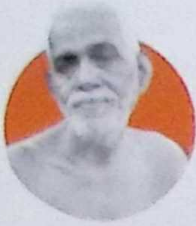


Look at so many foreigners coming here. We do not know how he brings them here. Something is acting as a “trigger” and makes them come here. So many people are spending their entire lives here! A lady from Iraq says, “More than Bhagavan, I do not want anything. Nothing. More than Bhagavan, I do not want anything. Here, in India, nothing is there for me. Only Bhagavan is there. It is up to Bhagavan, however he treats me, whatever he wants to do with me... That is the only relationship I have with India. Nothing else.”

This is the only one example I have cited. Innumerable people like her are present here. They come to the ashram every day and have their food during the poor feeding. All this demonstrate his radiant sacred presence here. The priests might tell you, “Wherever you go, you will not attain *moksha* – liberation. You have to come here for that.” However, has Bhagavan ever boasted, “I have given *moksha* to a crow. I have given *moksha* to a deer. I have given *moksha* to a cow, a dog and a snake.” Has he ever said these things to anybody? He has given *moksha* to a monkey too. Did he do all these to show off that he is a great “spiritual guru”? He only wore an ordinary *komanam* (loin cloth), walked about bare-bodied, using a stick, and asked people, “Hey, how are you? What are you doing?” and so on. Bhagavan was the embodiment of all powers of meditation and he had all the power to create many, different worlds. He himself had said once, “Don’t think I am chit-chatting with you now. Do you know what I am doing now? I am in 20 different bodies in 20 various worlds.” At the same time, he was a simple man to ordinary people. Where have we seen a person like him anywhere in the world? Where else have we seen a guru like him?

Those who call themselves gurus are not at all gurus. An ideal guru is one who should provide *moksha* to a person just by looking at him once. We do not know to how many persons Bhagavan has given *moksha*. We do not know how many persons have become holy because of him. We don’t need to know it.

I am happy to meet you.



Holding together India's spiritual fabric

V. Subramanian, administrator of Sri Ramanasramam speaks

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

*A*s the administrator of Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, the 80-year-old Mr. V. Subramanian has his hands full. But he carries this work-load lightly on his shoulders despite the many-sided activities of Sri Ramanasramam. He remains unruffled and is soft-spoken. Mr. Subramanian, popularly called Mani Anna by Sri Ramana Maharshi's devotees, was an engineer by profession in Mumbai before he opted for voluntary retirement in 1985 to help his father run the ashram when it was expanding. He is the grand-nephew of the Maharshi.

Excerpts from an interview with Subramanian:

■ Sri Ramanasramam is spic and span. It does many-sided work such as maintaining the shrines built for Sri Ramana Maharshi and his mother Azhagammal, the room where he attained *mukti*, the library, the *Veda Patasala*, the guest houses, the *gosala*, the archives, the free dispensary and so on.

For this, a bit of background is required. Although Sri Ramana Maharshi attained *samadhi* in 1950, his living presence is still felt. There is a strong belief that he continues to run the ashram even today. Even during the Maharshi's time, there were omissions and commissions here

and there in the administration. His brother Niranjanananda Swami was the *sarvadhikari* of the ashram then. He was my grandfather. Some criticism used to be there then. Balarama Reddy, the erudite senior devotee of Maharshi, was living in Sri Ramanasramam then. He was earlier in the Aurobindo Ashram, Puducherry. He came here although the Mother and Aurobindo tried to retain him there. Balarama Reddy used to say that people blamed Niranjanananda Swami for commissions and omissions in the administration, but it was not correct to do so. "We old devotees know that Bhagavan is running the entire ashram. He is behind everything," Balarama Reddy would say. We have seen that Bhagavan is quietly guiding all of us. That directly or indirectly answers your question on how the ashram is running.

After Chinna Swamy, that is, Niranjanananda Swami, T. N. Venkataraman (his son) was managing the ashram. Venkataraman was my father. I was basically an engineer working in Mumbai. In 1985, I took voluntary retirement because the ashram was expanding and my father needed more people to assist him. My father used to tell me that we should take care of three things from the management point of view and that Bhagavan was particular about them. These were: thrift (*sikkanam* in Tamil)), cleanliness (*suddham*) and punctuality.



If we take care of these three, Bhagavan will take care of the rest. Since he gave importance to thrift, cleanliness and punctuality, these three became the tradition here. Besides, his spiritual guidance is here.

■ **Dev Gogoi, a great devotee of Sri Ramana Maharshi, told me that lunch is served at 11.30 a.m. sharp and dinner at 7.30 p.m. I am seeing it happen. Four hundred people each have free breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner in the dining hall and the food is wholesome.**

You must have observed that there are no ashram personnel shouting at each other, giving commands and all that. Over the years, due to the working culture established here during Bhagavan's time - he himself would cut vegetables, do book-binding, etc... Most of us including Dr. C. N. Sreenivasamurthy are happy to get involved with the ashram work along with *sadhaks* and helpers. We do mix with them closely. By Sri Ramana Maharshi's grace, a good team has been developed over the years and it is running the affairs well.

On how it is all managed financially, by Bhagavan's grace, Chinna Swamy (Niranjanananda Swami) and his son T. N. Venkataraman were clear that we should not ask for donations. Not that we want to ride a high horse. Not like that. The donations received are all voluntary donations.

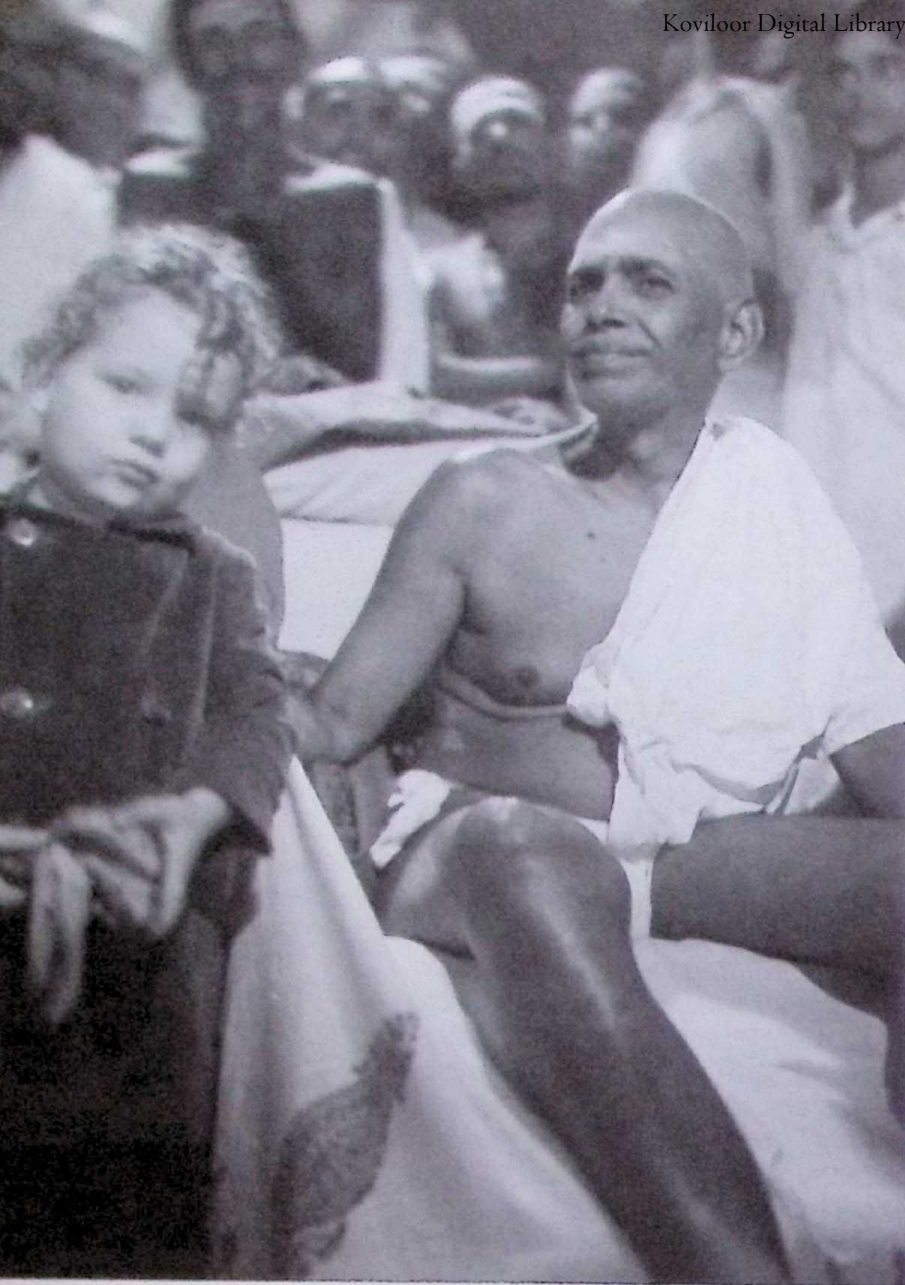
Nowadays, everybody talks about

ecology, solar power and all that. We have been using solar power extensively for the past 30 years. Dr. Chamanlal Gupta of Aurobindo Ashram is the father of the solar energy movement in India. He is our good friend. He helped us set up a solar energy plant here at the Ramanasramam and it is what we use now. We do rain water-harvesting at the micro and macro levels. We do grey water-harvesting. We reclaim more than 16,000 litres of water every day. Since we have a large *gosala* and we get enough cow dung, we have two gobar gas plants. The gas is piped into the kitchen for cooking food. It is all completely organic. The ashram gardens are cultivated in an organic manner. Our fertiliser and pest control methods are organic. A few kilometres away, we have a small farm of 6.5 acres of donated land. It is totally organic. We grow vegetables and peanuts which do not take care of our entire requirements. It does so partially. We are happy that it is all organic. We do bee-keeping, which is important in the scheme of nature.

■ **The Maharshi never performed miracles, in the usual sense. Were people like Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, Sivaprakasam Pillai, Natesa Mudaliar, Devaraja Mudaliar, Annamalai Swami, Suri Nagamma, Echammal, Kunju Swamy, F.H. Humphreys, Paul Brunton, Arthur Osborne, Major A. W. Chadwick, S. S. Cohen and others attracted by his query "Who Am I"?**

■ **THE BROTHERS:**
(From left) V.S. Ramanan, president, Sri Ramanasramam, V. Subramanian, its administrator and V. Ganesan, author of several books on Sri Ramana Maharshi.

- PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM



■ Can you explain the essence of his core teachings “Who am I?” and “Self-realisation”, his stress on non-duality and so on?

I am a fellow traveller. We have not reached the goal.

■ “Who am I?” baffles millions of people.

I will tell you one thing. Only when people ask me, I tell them, “Choose a guru.” Whether it is Jaggi Vasudev, Aurobindo, Ramakrishna Paramahansa or Ramana, choose a guru. Once chosen, totally believe in him. Then you can profit. If Bhagavan Maharshi says, “Practise this,” practise it. That is all. We have seen people progressing [from doing this].

Again, remember the very first *upadesa* that Maharshi gave his mother at Pavazhakkunru in 1898: “The ordainer controls the fate of the souls in accordance with their past deeds. Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try hard you may. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to stop it. This is certain. The best course, therefore, is for one to be silent.” In your own life and my life, we have seen that happen. Once that acceptance is there, practical life becomes easier.

I will tell you my personal experience. I was a boy of 11 years when Bhagavan attained *mukti*. Once we come to the ashram, we would go to the Old Hall and first prostrate before him. We were Nagasundaram’s grandchildren. All of us children and Arthur Osborne’s daughter, Kitty Osborne, felt absolutely natural in Maharshi’s presence. That explains why birds and animals also felt absolutely free with him.

(V. Subramanian shows me a photograph of Kitty Osborne as a little girl, standing next to Maharshi.)

Kitty is still alive. You can see her standing so casually next to Maharshi and she is in a frock. We were so much at ease with him.

■ Sri Ramana Maharshi’s mother took the decision to serve food to those staying at Skandasramam when

★ VALUED PICTURE:
Sri Ramana Maharshi
with Adam Osborn,
son of Arthur
Osborne, one of the
most committed
disciples of the
Maharshi.

- PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

At the material level, people have received benefits by quietly praying to Ramana. S.S. Cohen was an intellectual Jew. He gives an explanation. Bhagavan never gave importance to *siddhis* and miracles. But when a devotee comes and prays sincerely for something, it will be granted. There are forces - you can call them good angels - which are ready to help the devotees. They are waiting, they are ready to help the devotees. That is what Cohen used to say. These good forces, these angels are omniscient and they will be glad to help such people.

I would like to mention here how people from other religions are attracted to Bhagavan. A well-educated foreigner, who is a Christian, stands before the sculpture of Bhagavan in the New Hall and is mentally asking him, “I am a staunch Roman Catholic. Why am I attracted to you?” Mentally, he gets a reply, “So that you can get closer to Christ.” That is the sort of guidance people get.

she was staying with him there. Today, you provide free food to several hundreds of people every day in the ashram.

His grace is running the entire ashram, sir... At Skandasramam, it was a small kitchen. The first *aduppu* (*chula*) was lit by the Bhagavan's brother. They would have had some *kanji* (gruel).

■ I saw yesterday that those who could not make it to the dining hall stood in a queue at the ashram premises and several hundreds were served food.

During the winter months of November, December and January, many foreigners come here. Many East Europeans and Russians travel here. They come on a limited budget. Half of the queue will comprise foreigners. They have faith in Ramana and Arunachala.

■ Do you think the query "Who am I?" and their quest for Self-realisation bring them here?

Yes. Otherwise, they will not be coming here. They are in search of themselves. After all, these are the core of his teachings. By and by, with total faith in your guru, if you proceed, you will make progress.

■ People have told me that Maharshi never touched cash after he threw away his money at Ayyankulam and he never travelled more than 2 km from the Arunachala Hill for 54 years, since 1896. Do you know any other interesting facet of his life?

I do not know whether I can say this. Somewhere, it has been recorded that when his mother's temple was being built by the master *sthapathi*, Vaidyanatha Sthapathi, Bhagavan was against seeking donations for it. So work was coming to a standstill. Chinna Swamy, Bhagavan's younger brother,

was managing the entire project. He was the *sarvadhikari* of the ashram. He thought he could ask for donations. When Maharshi came to know about it, he was not happy about it at all. He said, "Don't do that. If money were to come, it will come. That is all." Money came. That [the temple for his mother] is proof.

One more personal experience. As youngsters, we were living in a joint family house. Quite often, we would spend the night here [in the ashram]. At 5 a.m., Vedic chanting would take place in front of Bhagavan in the Old Hall. He used to sit in the south-east corner. Due to the hard life he had led earlier, he developed a shaking of the head.

But during Vedic chanting, he would sit absolutely still to infinity. I remember that.

I will tell you another incident. My brother-in-law who was a chief engineer in Neyveli, would say that his neighbour, a doctor, would tell him that he [the neighbour] had operated on Bhagavan. The doctor's name was Rangachari.

The next time I went to Neyveli, my wife and I called on

Dr. Rangachari. They were an elderly Iyengar couple. Good souls. Mami [Mrs. Rangachari] wore her sari in the traditional Iyengar manner. We felt like prostrating before them and we did so. We asked Dr. Rangachari, "Sir, you had the unique honour of operating on Bhagavan. Please tell us about your experience." He paused for a minute. He replied, "Throughout my life, I have been a surgeon. I have seen so much of pain and suffering. Maharshi remained unconcerned during the surgery. What was required was amputation. He refused. He refused general anaesthesia. With local anaesthesia, we carried out such a major surgery. Throughout the surgery, he was alert. He had transcended his body."

I remembered that the surgery had taken place in the Old Dispensary. Nobody was allowed inside. We were



★ V. Subramanian

ashram boys and we were somehow allowed. From the compounder's side, I saw what was happening. Bhagavan was propped up on a cushion and his hand was resting on it. After the operation was over, they had to bandage the portion. We then saw a whole mass of blood. But Bhagavan had the same look - what I had seen earlier on his face in the Old Hall, his looking into infinity and the horizon. Bhagavan had the same look. It was amazing. I will always remember this, sir. It was a very intense personal experience for me. I do not normally share this with others.

■ **How did it occur to Sri Ramana Maharshi to start the *Veda Patasala*? The teacher there told me that it is an eight-year course and the education, food and stay are free for the pupils.**

I cannot give you a direct reply. You have seen the *samadhi* of Major A.W. Chadwick. He was the person who revived the *Veda Patasala*. Initially, he found that the Vedic chanting was disturbing his meditation. He told

Bhagavan about it. Bhagavan told him, "No, you will see, by and by, that it gives you solace." Major Chadwick found it to be true. For lack of funds, the *Veda Patasala* was almost closed. Major Chadwick, who complained to Bhagavan that the Vedic chanting was disturbing his meditation, took the initiative and revived the *Veda Patasala*. Why Bhagavan started it, I do not know.

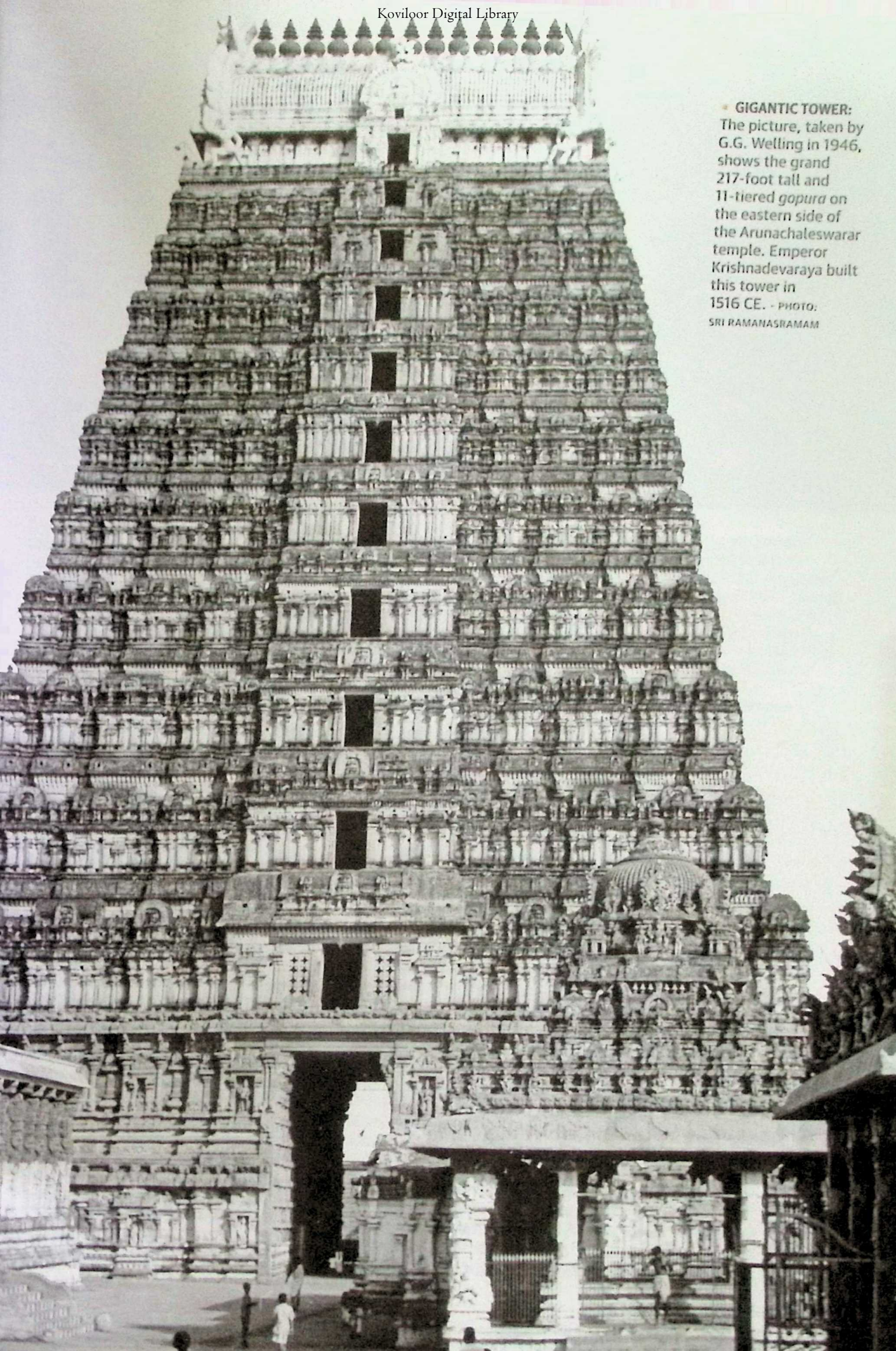
■ **Do you want to highlight anything about Maharshi's life and teachings, which will be of relevance to the younger generation?**

The younger generation's exposure [to the world] is more, thanks to internet and Facebook. Their sense of discrimination is more. That is why Bhagavan's teachings are attracting them more. The spiritual fabric of this country is holding it together. The younger generation taking interest in Bhagavan's teachings augurs well for India. The spiritual fabric, which is holding India together, is strengthened by Maharshi's teachings.

▼ G.G. Welling took this picture of Sri Ramana Maharshi seated on his couch in the Old Hall (now the Meditation Hall).

— PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM





• **GIGANTIC TOWER:**
The picture, taken by
G.G. Welling in 1946,
shows the grand
217-foot tall and
11-tiered *gopura* on
the eastern side of
the Arunachaleswarar
temple. Emperor
Krishnadevaraya built
this tower in
1516 CE. - PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM



“A place where all are equal”

*Interview with Dr. Venkat Ramanan,
the incoming president of
Sri Ramanasramam*

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

The pleasant and mild-mannered Dr. Venkat Ramanan is all set to take over as president of Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, from his father, V.S. Ramanan, who is the son of the late Swami Ramanananda, sometime in 2020. It is no easy job to do, for Sri Ramanasramam executes a variety of activities with clock-work precision.

Dr. Venkat Ramanan is a medical practitioner in Washington, D.C. in the U.S. He completed his MBBS from the Baroda Medical College in Gujarat, and received his M.D. in Internal Medicine from the same college. He is board certified in Internal Medicine from the American Board of Internal Medicine. He has been practising medicine in the U.S. from 1998.

After he takes over as the president of Sri Ramanasramam, Dr. Venkat Ramanan says that he will “maintain the purity of the place”, “not commercialise it” and “not create a power structure”. The ashram is a place “where the humblest can sit side-by-side with a billionaire,” he says. “We are all equal in Bhagavan’s eyes,” he reasons.

Excerpts from the interview with him:

■ The number of devotees visiting Sri Ramanasramam has gone up manifold in the last few decades. In the coming years, how do you plan to sustain the ashram’s multifarious

activities such as running a free *Veda Patasala*, providing free food to several hundred devotees four times a day, running a free medical centre for the public, giving free accommodation to devotees in its guest houses, maintaining the *gosala* and so on?

I have been living in the U.S. since 1994. I am planning to come back and settle down here at Tiruvannamalai. So I have the unique perspective of being somebody from outside looking in, rather than an insider looking out. I have the perspective of how hard it is for devotees from abroad to plan a trip to India. They spend several months planning their visit to the ashram and with great intensity spend their entire time in the ashram without wasting a single moment, filling their bowls with the spiritual nectar emanating from the shrine. Their love for Bhagavan and Arunachala, and the Indian culture is so great that they adapt to our way of living, enjoying every minute of their stay here.

Going forward, we must preserve the same ancient traditions that we have here. That is what most people are interested in. They want a combination of ancient traditions and an emphasis on the practice of Bhagavan’s teachings. Nowadays, there are a lot of places where people can go to listen to a lecture, for a price. But people are coming here to live the way that Bhagavan lived and feel his living



presence. So first, we will try to maintain the sanctity of the place for devotees for people to practice his teachings quietly and attain spiritual progress.

■ **You do not have financial problems?**

Finance was never planned even during the time of Bhagavan. Ramanasramam gets donations for its requirements without soliciting. You must have observed that there are no *hundis* kept in the ashram and devotees can only donate in the office with a full receipt for every donation. There are no charges levied for staying in the ashram guestrooms and the food is free.

Our emphasis is only on maintaining the peace of this place so that devotees are totally free to become attuned to the spiritual vibrations here and pursue spiritual practices. As you might have noticed, there are many serious spiritual seekers visiting the ashram. Most of them have had grounding in the teachings of Bhagavan and in the practice of Advaita Vedanta. They are here to further their practice and to get a *satsangha*.

In the last few years there has been a tremendous increase in the awareness about Bhagavan and his teachings all over India and the world. The internet and social media have spread his message all over the world exponentially. The ashram Facebook page in many Indian and international languages has more than 1.1 million

followers. Every year, the number of followers is increasing by 15 per cent to 20 per cent. The ashram has its own YouTube page as well.

■ **More than 1.1 million followers globally?**

These include 22,000 Spanish-speaking people, some 8,000 followers from Russia. Not everybody can come here physically. Devotees can maintain contact with the ashram through the internet and social media. Through the YouTube channel and the Facebook page, we can telecast the activities of the ashram for these people. They are virtually following - they are in tune with the ashram.

We have the Voice of Arunachala. It is an app. People can listen to chants, songs and lectures from the ashram 24 hours a day, and the daily *parayana*. We have a monthly e-newsletter called *Saranagati*. We have a quarterly journal called *Mountain Path*.

■ **In the latest issue of *Mountain Path*, Gopalkrishna Gandhi (grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and former West Bengal Governor) has written about Mahatma Gandhi. A foreigner has written about the Paramacharya. Photographer V. Karthik, whom you know, told me that both Mahatma Gandhi and Paramacharya had never physically met Sri Ramana Maharshi. I used to wonder why Sri Ramana Maharshi kept aloof from India's**

■ **TO SHOULDER RESPONSIBILITY:**

Dr. Venkat Ramanan, who will take over as the president of Sri Ramanasramam in 2020 from his father V.S. Ramanan.

- PHOTO:

S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

freedom struggle. However, some of the articles in that issue of *Mountain Path* show that he was keenly following the freedom struggle.

I must quote from what I have read. Bhagavan was aware of (obviously) the Independence struggle, but his spiritual path was that of *Jnana Marga*. The *jnani*, having destroyed his mind, has no *Sankalpa*. He has no wants or desires, likes or dislikes. He used to say that if a person could achieve *jnana*, the positive benefits for society are tremendous. Rajendra Prasad (freedom fighter and the first President of India) was his devotee. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi used to send freedom fighters to the ashram when they were emotionally burnt out, to recharge their spiritual batteries. Sarojini Naidu and Jamnalal Bajaj have spent time at the ashram. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan was a devotee.

Professor K. Swaminathan, [who was the Chief Editor of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*] was a great devotee of Bhagavan.

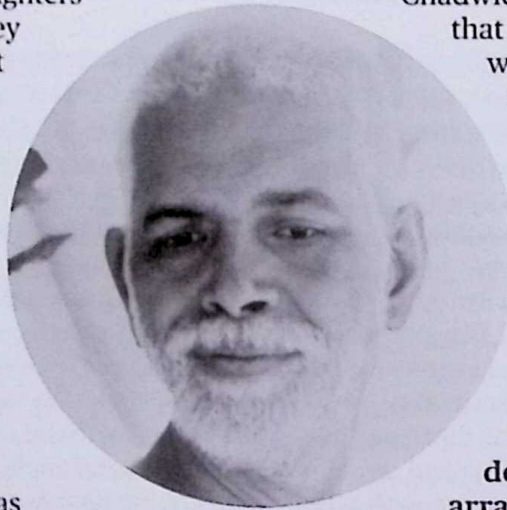
Professor Swaminathan's conviction was that Bhagavan was the spiritual Sun, and Mahatma Gandhi, the Moon, providing solace to the masses. Prof K. S. used to say that if the Moon meets the Sun, it would melt and cease to exist. That is why providence kept the two away.

With regards to the non-meeting of the Kanchi Shankaracharya and Bhagavan, there is an anecdote reported by G.V. Subbaramayya in his book - "When someone asked if Holiness Kanchi Shankaracharya and Sri Bhagavan ever met, Sri Bhagavan replied, "When were we separate that we should now meet? We are always together."

Bhagavan used to read the newspapers every day. He was aware of not only India's freedom struggle, but World War II as well. Some British devotees had settled down here at the ashram. They used to be worried about Britain's fate. Bhagavan was so accessible to them that

they could discuss their fears with him. Major Chadwick [a great devotee of Sri Ramana and a resident of the ashram] came from a family of British admirals. After hearing about the imminent invasion of Britain by Germany, he went to Bhagavan and lamented, "Germany is probably attacking Britain tomorrow and Britain is going to be finished." Bhagavan was working in the kitchen. Shaking his head, Bhagavan said, "But Russia..." and then kept quiet. The next day, for no logical reason, Hitler ordered his troops to attack Russia instead.

It was winter in Russia. Hitler lost to Russia and Britain was saved. Major Chadwick's devotion was such that he would say that it was Bhagavan's silent intervention that changed the history of the world. That is the power of a *jnani*.



■ Unlike other foundations which conduct many programmes, deliver video-talks, arrange lectures, organise retreats and propagate their founder's teachings, Sri Ramanasramam does not preach his teachings at all. You only sell books on Ramana Maharshi in your bookstore on the ashram premises. You don't seem to propagate his teachings/philosophy.

It is because we believe that Bhagavan is still here and that he is a living guru. He is ever teaching in silence like Lord Dakshinamurthy. Before leaving the body, he said, "They say I am dying, but I am not going away. Where could I go? I am here." Even when he was in his physical body, his main teaching was in silence. There is a famous quote of his, "First there is abstract knowledge. From it there arises the Ego, which gives rise to thoughts and then words. Words are therefore the great grandson of the Original Source. If words can produce an effect, how much powerful should the teaching through Silence be?" Bhagavan

is communicating to his devotees in silence.

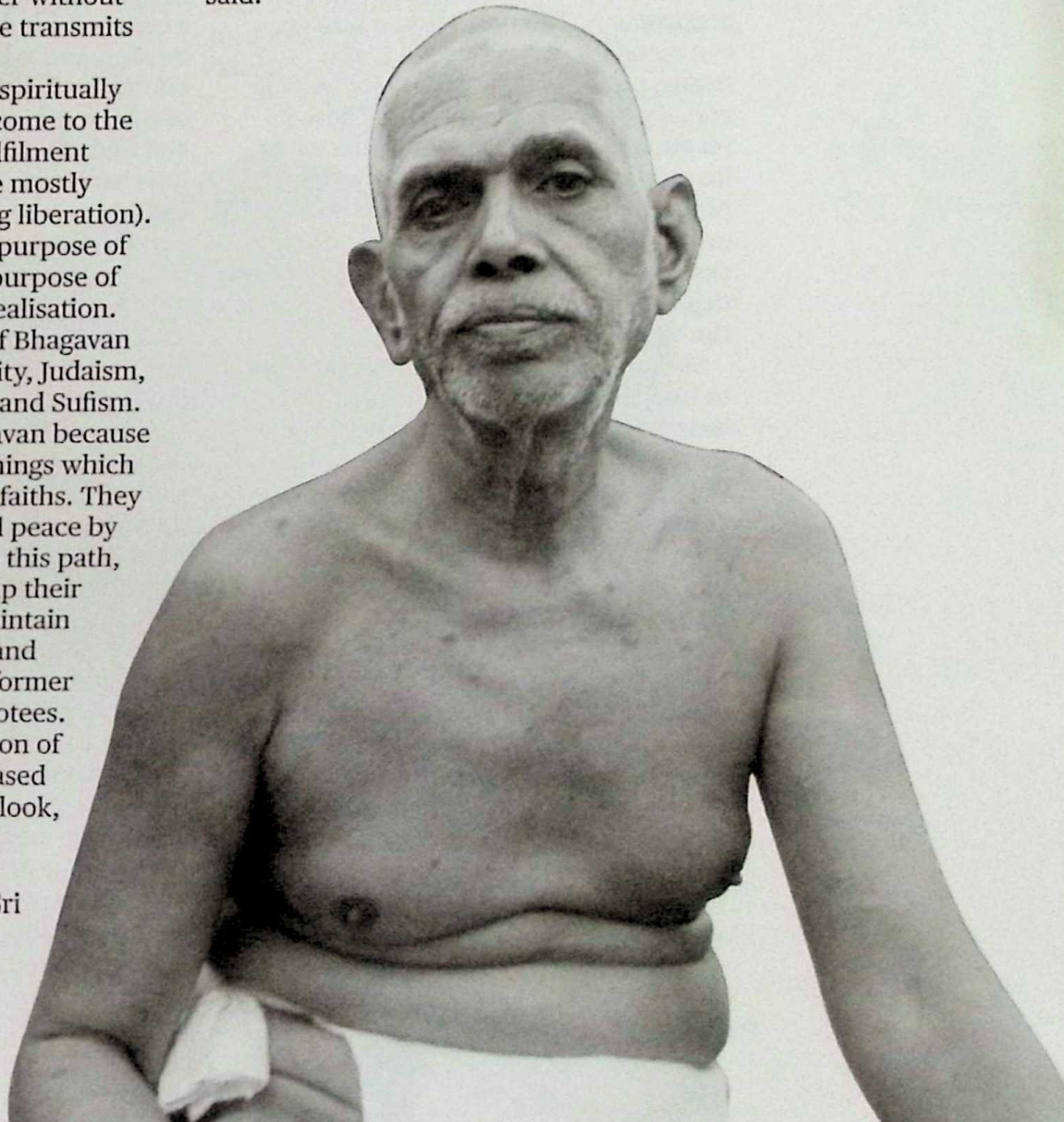
The devotee does not choose Bhagavan, but it is Sri Bhagavan who chooses whom to bring to him. Many a devotee from different parts of the world have recounted that they happened to open a book in a library or book shop and saw Bhagavan's picture, felt his eyes emanate spiritual energy and love. On reading his teachings, they find that this is the teaching they were looking for all their lives. All their spiritual questions get answered and they become staunch devotees without any proselytizing. Bhagavan's teaching is unique. It is not only for the 21st, 22nd or 23rd century, but it will keep evolving for the conditions of the modern world because it contains the essence of Advaita to be practised anywhere in the world, while performing one's *karma* (duties).

On this path, you are not expected to join any organisation, perform any *sevas*. You are ever with the Master without any middlemen. His picture transmits knowledge.

Bhagavan's devotees are spiritually ripe. Most of them do not come to the ashram with prayers for fulfilment of material wants. They are mostly *Mumukshus* (people seeking liberation). They are searching for the purpose of human birth. The highest purpose of human birth is to get Self-realisation. There are many devotees of Bhagavan from the faiths of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Sufism. They are attracted to Bhagavan because they find clarity in his teachings which they could not find in their faiths. They find spiritual happiness and peace by practising his teachings. On this path, no one is expected to give up their original faiths. They can maintain their names and traditions and follow his teachings. Many former atheists are his staunch devotees. We are a composite institution of a cosmopolitan character based on Bhagavan's universal outlook, making the ashram open to all devotees, irrespective of their religion. Even during Sri Bhagavan's time, followers of other faiths such as

Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, etc. were his staunch devotees. Bhagavan was above all rules and restrictions and practices in the matter of religious worship.

You said that we do not have an organisation [to propagate his teachings]. There are many Ramana centres in many cities all over the world, where the devotees regularly meet and have *satsanghs*. In America, Australia and Europe, we have *satsanghs* as well. In the Washington metro area, we have *satsanghs* twice a month. In the west, people come for such *satsanghs* from places a hundred miles away. More and more informal gatherings are gaining ground. I met a Gandhian in Ahmedabad. He said he had gone to various spiritual places. Sri Ramanasramam and Ramakrishna Mission are the only two [spiritual] institutions which continue to grow more after their saints' passing away, he said.



■ **Can you explain what Ramana Maharshi meant when he kept exhorting people, *Summa iru* (be still, in Tamil)?**

His whole philosophy is to be the unbiased observer to the happenings of life, hold on to the spiritual 'I', the centre. Don't react. The whole drama of our life is our reaction to the happenings around us. *Summa iru* is a practice of mindfulness. We cannot control the happenings in the world. But we can control our response to such happenings. By maintaining an inward bent of the mind, if we pay scant attention to the external happenings and maintain our poise, we can perform our daily duties without being affected by the results they bring about. There will always be peace within and around us. Our daily activities will flow in a smooth, uncluttered way instead of in an emotional, angry, fatiguing way. The ultimate state is one of mindlessness.

Bhagavan said everything in one's life will happen according to one's *prarabdham*. The only effort a human can make is not be attached to the results of one's activities and follow Self-enquiry by plunging inwards. There is no impediment to somebody following his spiritual practices and having a busy professional life, like being a journalist or physician. With regular practice, one ceases to have emotions like elation or dejection resulting from the outcomes of the worldly activities.

Summa iru is sometimes misunderstood to be a state of inactivity. Most of his devotees had active careers and were married. He never encouraged *sanyasa*, the practice of people wearing ochre-coloured robes and going into a forest. He encouraged devotees to do *Atma Vichara* while leading active lives, performing one's duties (*karmas*).

Sri Ramana Maharshi was more interested in the spiritual upliftment of one person at a time than achieving a mass following/teaching. We are all eternal. We are the Whole, we are the real reality the *atma*. It is only ignorance to think of us as ephemeral, limited and to consider the body as real. That was his teaching. All we must do is to remove this ignorance. He used to say that all of us are realised. But the impediment is

our thought, that tells us that we are not realised. If you remove this, the ignorance is all gone.

There is no system of selling lectures. The ashram allows free downloads of many books in various languages to spread the teachings of Bhagavan's for the benefit of the world. That is why he is attracting so many devotees. These days, people judge the impact of a saint's teachings themselves, by their own spiritual progress and the peace achieved by following the teachings. That is why he is attracting people from all over. Recently, a book on Sri Bhagavan and his teachings was translated into the Arabic language by an Arab devotee, and was made available for downloading on Facebook. There were 700 downloads of this book in the Islamic countries.

■ **In Islamic countries?**

In Iran, Saudi Arabia and many other Islamic countries, because the spiritual quest is not confined to any skin colour or a certain faith. Internally, when somebody awakes, and asks the questions, "What am I doing in this birth? What is the purpose of this birth?", he needs to introspect and find his own way for solving the internal quest. This is where Bhagavan's teachings come to his aid and solve the questions arising within. Many people in the western countries have feelings of emptiness. Even after the fulfilment of most of their material wants, they don't feel happy. That search for an eternal happiness brings them to Sri Bhagavan.

■ **Do you plan to coordinate the activities of the Ramana Kendras functioning in Chennai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, New Delhi and so on, to spread his teachings?**

Definitely. For Bhagavan gave a lot of importance to *satsangha*, in which like-minded people come together for a higher purpose. They can interact with the senior devotees and practise his teachings because everything is based on individual practice. It is self-improvement. In fact, Bhagavan said, "The biggest tribute you can pay me is to follow my teachings and attain Self-realisation." He did not come to formulate a new philosophy or establish a new religion. He came to make us all

into Ramanas, where we lose our “body I am” consciousness by Self-enquiry (as to who am I) and receive enlightenment. That was the key purpose of Bhagavan’s birth.

Yesterday, in the ashram, they sang, “*Ayye, ati sulabham anma viddhai*” (Hey! Knowledge of *Atman* is very easy). He came to demystify the spiritual path and he said, “There is no aura about this.”

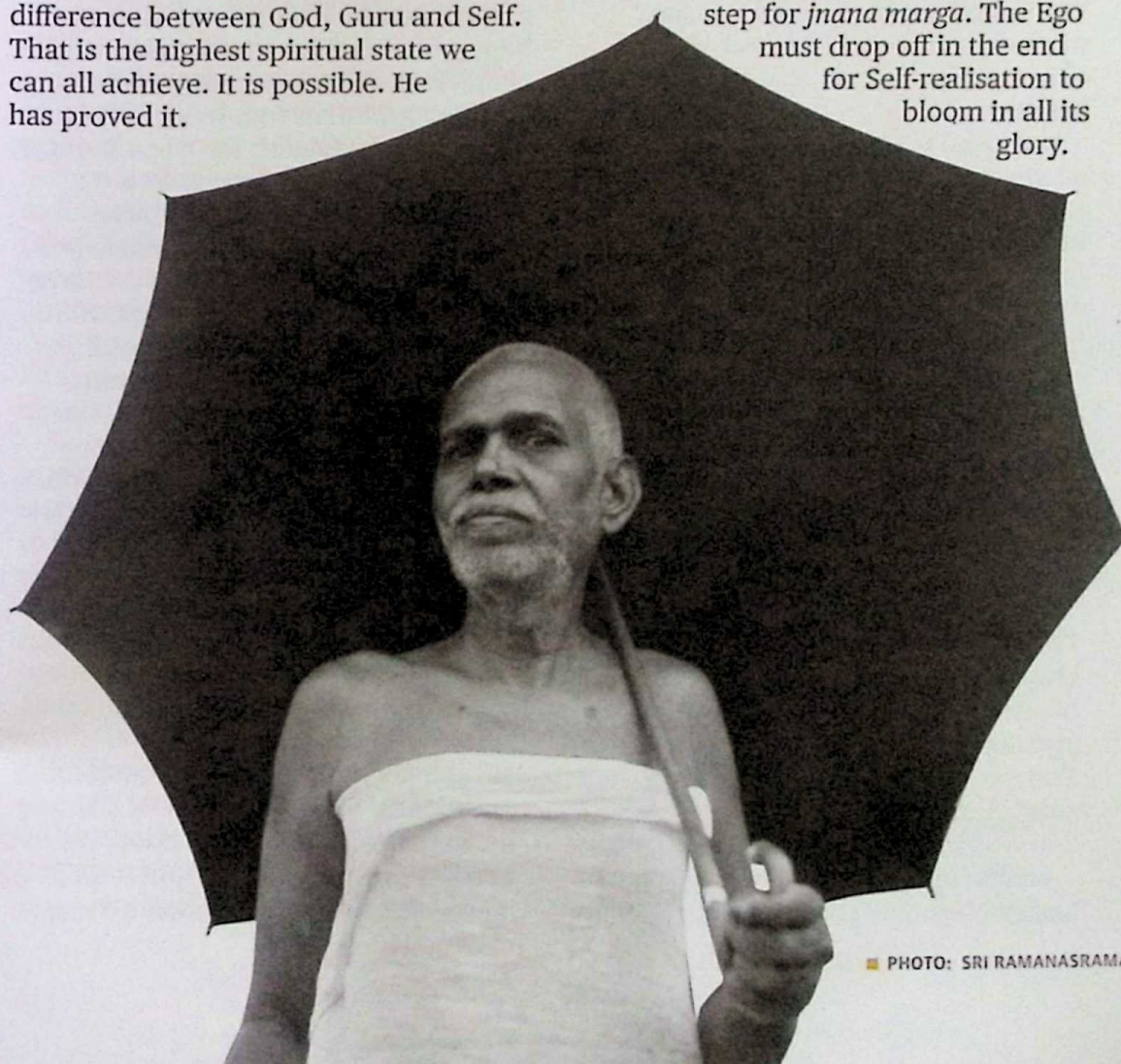
There is another quote of his, which says, “If your intentions are pure, the method will find its way.” That is why he never said, “This is the only way to practise the teachings.” He never said, “You have to sit like his. You have to get up at this time in the morning. You have to do *asanas*, etc.” No. It is connecting inwards. What may work for you may not work for me. If our intentions are pure, our internal guru, whom we call Ramana, will guide all of us eternally.

Bhagavan said, “The guru is both outer and inner. From outside, he gives a push to the mind to turn inward, while from inside, he pulls the mind towards the Self and helps in quieting it.” That is the Grace of the Guru. There is no difference between God, Guru and Self. That is the highest spiritual state we can all achieve. It is possible. He has proved it.

We will just provide the devotees with the infrastructure to be with Bhagavan, one on one. That is our job - to maintain the purity of the place, not to commercialise it and not to create a power structure. We want the ashram to be a place where the humblest can sit side-by-side with a billionaire. We are all equal in Bhagavan’s eyes.

■ **You said Ramanasramam is a place where egos come to die.**

Yes, Ramanasramam is a place where egos come to die. That is why people are trying to chip away at their egos so that they can remain as the Real Self. It is one of the highest methods of spiritual practice, Bhagavan has said. Ego annihilation is the only way to *moksha*. Ego is the one which is coming between us and the inner spiritual light we have. Adi Sankara said the Ego is like a cloud covering the bright sun. By Self-enquiry alone we can weaken the hold of the Ego. The uniqueness of Bhagavan’s teaching is that he did not reject the *bhakti marga* or the *karma marga*, but recognised them as a preparatory step for *jnana marga*. The Ego must drop off in the end for Self-realisation to bloom in all its glory.



■ PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM



From Assam to Arunachala

*In which arrival and departure
are but a reality to be understood
differently*

▪ DEV GOGOI ▪



When the sun rises on this vast and ancient land, with all its harmonies and cacophonies, wisdom and mundanities, it rises in the east. This a truism to which all would agree, from down-to-earth geographers to astronomers of the stars. So then, when we speak of simplicities in the clear light of day, where lies the heart, the soul of our olden, golden culture, traditions and heritage?

One need not reply, let alone provide an answer, for however great is human knowledge, it is but a tiny speck in the infinitude of the unknown. Another fact, another truism. When all is mystery, then every journey, each life, is an adventure without forgone conclusions.

From the east to the south is a journey of some three thousand measurable kilometers. What then is the distance from the mind to the heart? You yourself will know your own answer. True fact!

I was born into the lineage of Ahoms. They have a proud history. The Mughals famously tasted defeat at their hands, but the Ahoms were unable to outsmart the machinations of the British Empire. Today, that part of the country contributes immense natural wealth and cultural diversity to a great nation.

My family are typical, ordinary sons and daughters of the soil, though on my

maternal side there is a recorded family tree that goes back centuries. Many of them have distinguished themselves in public life and the professions. My parents sacrificed all they could in order to provide the best education for their children. However, as we shall see, the best laid plans can go awry.

At school, in a beautiful valley nestled in the foothills of the Himalaya, I was happy. Some of our teachers were real characters. One of them was a young blond Englishman with long curly locks who taught us English for a few months. It was the sixties of the previous century, the first decade of flower power, the hippies, and the Magic Bus on the Road to Kathmandu. G A Clarke was straight in comparison, an Oxford graduate, though his well-pressed trousers did flare out at the bottom. "Bell-bottoms" they were called.

The most painful, unavoidable, weekly assignment for us was to write a 300-word essay in English. The topic was given on Saturday and we had to hand in our exercise books on Monday, without fail, thus tainting the anticipated weekend with an amorphous sense of dread.

That week, Mr. Clarke blithely announced that the topic was "Nothing". Instantly, every young mind went blank. Could that, by any chance, mean that we were off the hook? No need to write anything? Yippee! Well no, no chance. We had to write those

three hundred words on “nothing”. But that’s impossible! Normally, kids are asked to write on “what I did in my summer vacations” or “what I would do if I were the Prime Minister”. How can we write something, anything, on “nothing”? It wasn’t easy, take my word for it, but I am pleased to make this belated announcement that I earned a commendation. “Good Chits” they were called.

So, Sir, what does “G A” stand for? “Guru Aurobindo,” he replied. Who’s Aurobindo? “He’s my Guru.” Well, we were immediately out of our depth, blissful in our ignorance, and that particular discussion did not take off.

On the other hand, my Housemaster was a towering figure of a man, both literally and figuratively, whom the whole school affectionately called “Guru”. In the school timetable, way more complex than the periodic table of elements, space permitted only two alphabets to represent each teacher. Guru’s was “Gu”.

Guru was a team-member of the first Indian expedition to successfully climb Mt Everest in 1965. The national euphoria can scarcely be imagined today. When the Arjuna Award was offered to the expedition leader, he refused to accept, unless all nineteen team members got it too. And so they did. Guru played a key role in the joint effort that placed nine members on the summit, holding the fort, as it were, on the freezing, windswept South Col (7,906 m) for several nights, spanning four successful summit forays, without oxygen. That’s another world record.

So when Guru asked me one morning to fetch about a dozen *mani* stones from the Art School to his house on campus, it was a request I couldn’t refuse. These stones are ubiquitous throughout the Himalayas, found atop remote mountain passes and sacred spots along the trail, each inscribed with a chiselled prayer, usually *Om Mani Padme Hum!* Each was the size of a plate and weighed several kilograms. It was not possible to do it all by myself. Luckily, my classmates were kind and we did it as a team, much

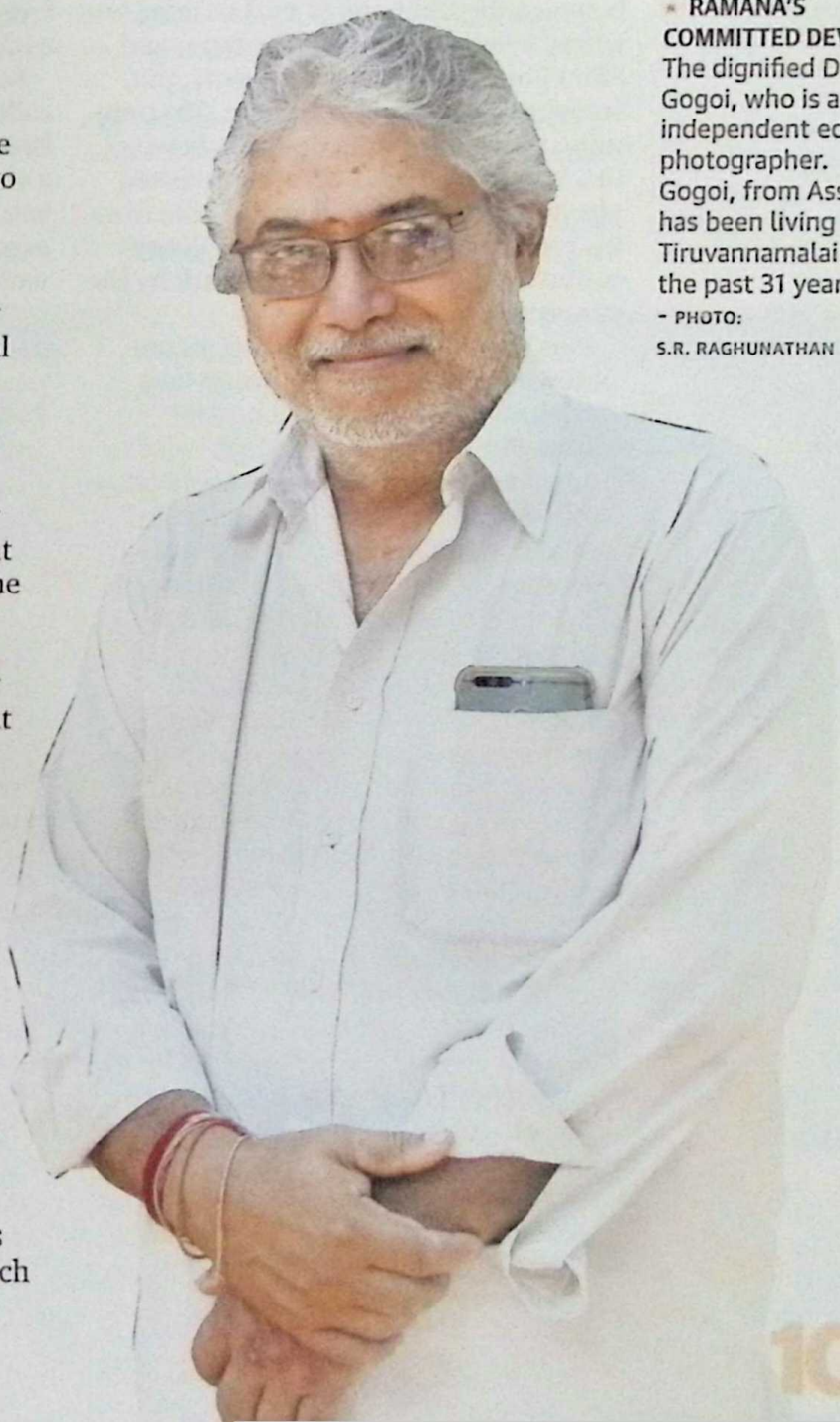
to Guru’s satisfaction. How was I to know that I was actually cradling in my arms the most powerful *mantra* north of the Himalaya, “*Om*, the jewel (of consciousness) in the lotus (of the heart), *swaha!*”

Space does not permit the mention of my other precious teachers.

I discovered the joys of reading at the age of eleven and immediately became a voracious one. Among the usual popular titles of interest to a child of that age, bought with pocket money that was saved by foregoing sweets and treats, there were two that captured my imagination: *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda, and *A Search in Secret India* by Paul

★ **RAMANA’S COMMITTED DEVOTEE:**
The dignified Dev Gogoi, who is an independent editor/photographer. Gogoi, from Assam, has been living in Tiruvannamalai for the past 31 years.

– PHOTO:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



Brunton. They transported me to joyful, heavenly realms that seemed to have no connection whatsoever to ordinary, earthly life. And again, I did not perceive that they were actually ticking time-bombs, quietly measuring out the countdown of a benevolent destiny.

Nothing travels in a straight line, not even light. And so it was, with my peripatetic peregrinations around this commodious subcontinent, as tall as it is wide. Thank you, Indian Railways, and in those days, Third Class.

That fatal crack in the solid facade of ordinary everyday life occurred without any fanfare amidst the roiling, uber-active streets of Mumbai. I was strolling along the teeming sidewalk between the Old Lady of Bori Bunder, where I was employed at the time, and Flora Fountain. Above the chaotic din, somebody called out my name. That was unusual. I stopped and looked about me. It was my friend, an accomplished photographer, who had spotted me from his motorcycle in the middle of dense traffic and had pulled over to park by the pavement.

Was I interested in reporting an out-of-town feature story? He would take the pictures. Yes. I pitched it to my editor. She approved. So off we went to a small village somewhere in Karnataka. It was an ancient place of pilgrimage in the Dattatreya tradition. The story was spectacular. Devotees thronged to the small temple there in order to be exorcised of possessive spirits.

In the course of our quest for understanding, at an even smaller temple at the meeting of two rivers, in the vicinity of a sacred *udumbara* (fig) tree, we were chatting with a group of sadhus. It was dusk. Eventually, all fingers pointed to a man hovering within earshot, observing the proceedings with an air of visible, gentle amusement. "Ask him. He knows," said the sadhus. And so we did.

Satisfaction at last. Maharaj, as he was respectfully addressed by one and all, answered all our questions, clarified all our confusions. When there was nothing more to speak of, in the long pause that ensued, he softly proffered, "None of this matter." I immediately felt a stirring

within. A challenge. A deeper curiosity. "What does?" I asked.

Maharaj was a *mouni*. He was practising a vow of absolute silence. Yet this was no impediment to our eloquent, transparent communication, through his graceful gestures, the bright and penetrating look of his eyes, and the occasional phrase written in beautiful Hindi in my notebook.

He wrote, "मैं कौन हूँ?" Who am I?

In that moment, the present began to unravel. I am so-and-so. "No. You are not." This is my name. "Yes. But that's not you." I am this body. "No, you are not." He was calm, confident, certain. I was exasperated, confounded, unable to give a satisfactory answer. And so it continued for another couple of exquisite evenings.

Before we left that place, when we called on him to say goodbye, he had been awaiting us. He gifted my friend a short, priceless written statement. It was *upadesa*, *prasad*, a pure and simple expansion of *atma vichara* (Self-enquiry) with his blessings.

The next phase in the downward arc of my fledgling career was to soon follow. I never wrote that story. My photographer friend was infinitely patient and finally wrote the story himself, and it was published with his striking photographs. Within weeks my outer life fell apart and I was unable to pick up the pieces. Couldn't stay in the same place, couldn't go backwards. Where to next? With a month's salary in hand, my last, I headed south, into the unknown.

I arrived in Pondicherry and checked in as a guest of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The dormitory cost ₹2 and all meals in the Dining Hall were ₹6 per day. We slept on the floor and shared washroom facilities. I possessed two shoulder bags. It was all within budget and I couldn't ask for more.

I wandered the immaculate boulevards, delighted in the colonnaded architecture, and breathed deeply along the ocean-side promenade of this former French colony.

And then I met this young, impeccable sadhu who declined to share his date or place of birth, for *karmic* reasons. I had never encountered such reasoning

before. He saw something in me that was not visible to me in the mirror. "You may want to go to Tiruvannamalai," he suggested gently. What is there? I asked. "A mountain," he replied. Something stirred and grew in the middle of my chest. "In a week, there is a big festival there. They light a fire on the top of the mountain." The decision was made. It would take too long to walk. I caught the bus.

As we sped through lush monsoon landscapes, and Arunachala arose out of its surroundings, I felt beauty and peace. Upon alighting in Tiruvannamalai, and looking up to Arunachala, up close and personal, that inner movement had met an outer stillness.

I asked my way to Sri Ramanasramam, simply followed my feet. Went up the mountain to Skandashram, down to Virupaksha Cave, then into the Big Temple at the foot of the Hill. Walked the 13 km around the Hill.

Took off my kolhapuri chappals halfway at Adiannamalai, hobbled

barefeet the rest of the way to arrive back where I had started. On *Karthigai Deepam* day, I joined thousands of other devotees as they climbed to the top of Arunachala.

It took a day or two for the long-forgotten fairy tale of a Secret India to explode into life. This is Arunachala! This is Ramana! This is real! And I am here.

Three decades down the line, a little older but none the wiser, it was pointed out to me the other day that all arrival stories are actually tales of departure, but that is another, as yet unfinished story. Birth and death bracket but a tiny continuum of space-time in the infinite cosmos. Life remains a mystery. Warm wishes for your journey. I would wish as much for mine.

அன்பே ரமணா! அன்பே அருணாச்சல!
Beloved Ramana! Beloved Arunachala!

*Dev Gogoi is an independent
photographer/editor, Tiruvannamalai.*

★ A BEAUTIFUL VIEW:
The Arunachala hill with its summit. In the foreground is Pali Theertham, a sacred tank. On the right can be seen the *vimana* of the Matrubhuteswarar temple.

- PHOTO: © DEV GOGOI





The Maharshi & the scope for the aspirant

What the Bhagavan means to his many disciples and the legacy he left behind

▪ VIKRAM RAMAKRISHNAN ▪



One hundred and forty years ago, in the early hours of the 30th of December, was born a man who was to define consciousness as well as anybody has in the history of mankind. Carl Jung was to write about his thoughts: "What we find here is a purest India, the breath of eternity, scorning and scorned by the world. It is the song of the ages, resounding like the shrilling of crickets on a summer's night from a million beings. The melody is built upon a great theme, which veiling on it's monotony under a thousand colourful reflections, tirelessly and everlastingly rejuvenates itself in the Indian spirit whose youngest reincarnation is Shri Ramana himself."

Born in a village named Tiruchuzhi, about 56 kms, to the south of Madurai, he grew up in an ordinary family, until a "death experience" awakened him in adolescence. Such an awakening made him take shelter under the holy hill of Arunachala located in Tiruvannamalai. For a lot of his devotees who gathered around him in due course, being with him was akin to being sheltered at a home and beyond. Thereafter, there was a brief interlude with silence, when he was absorbed with nothing but the infinite. The same ended with Ramana Maharshi writing with his finger on sandy soil or on slips of paper or on a slate on questions concerning the nature of ultimate reality. A committed

devotee brought out these writings which he had jotted in a notebook, in the first two decades of the 20th century, in the form of a publication called *Who am I? (Naan Yaar)*. In the words of Major Chadwick (one of the first Western devotees of the saint) who was to say on the teachings in *Who Am I?*, "No more is needed". The publication was in a question-answer format and contained 28 questions. The essence of this teaching is that the direct path to liberation is self-enquiry. The aspirant is directed to ask in whom these thoughts arise, in turn such a thought slowly but surely erases thoughts itself. Then the enquiry takes the aspirant to *sakshatkara*, wherein the 'I' thought is destroyed and the self is realised. The premise to liberation in *Who am I?* proceeds on the basis that the aspirant is not the body or the mind or its impressions or its residues, but is the nectar that is consciousness as was so succinctly illustrated by Adi Sankara in *Nirvana Shatakam*. Surely in the mix of *Who am I?*, *Nirvana Shatakam* and Self-Enquiry, we can say, lies the nature of ultimate reality.

Another important work of Ramana Maharshi is the *Upadesa Saram* in 30 slokas wherein it is said that the essential nature of mind is consciousness but the mind, however, lives in amnesia forgetting its true nature! It clings on to tendencies, past experiences and thoughts that we can

safely and loudly say is Maya. To get out of that miserable state and proceed to the doorways of heaven is what we call as the enquiry by name: "Who am I?"

Ramana Maharshi was fondly known as Bhagavan to his followers. One of his popular books is called *Ulladu Narpadu* (*Forty Verses on Reality*). In this seminal work published in 1928, Bhagavan asks the aspirant to investigate the nature of his /her own mind and consciousness. In this heady elixir, a contribution was played by one of Bhagavan's illustrious disciples, Muruganar. He collected the sayings of the Maharshi and the Maharshi himself composed some of the forty verses.

By the 1930's, the words and the spirit of *Who Am I?* and *Ulladu Narpadu* (*Forty Verses on Reality*) had started truly spreading. In 1934, Mahatma Gandhi visited Tiruvannamalai to attend a political meeting and also wanted to meet the Maharshi. However, C. Rajagopalachari prevented this as he thought that if they met, the national movement may suffer. Tragedies do occur in history, and this is a living proof of the same.

His fame spread across the seas and Paul Brunton reached the ashram. In his words, the Maharshi held his attention as steel filings are held by a magnet. In 1934, Paul Brunton published a book about his meeting with Ramana called *A Search in Secret India*. In 1942, came the Oxford educator, Arthur Osborne, who continued to live in Arunachala after the tragic mid-April day of 1950. He went on to write numerous books on the Maharshi and they were all classics. Arthur Osborne captured the journey in the Maharshi's own words which was thus:

"I have read no books except the *Periya Puranam*, *The Bible*, and bits of *Thayumanavar Thevaram*. My conception of *Isvara* was similar to that found in the *puranas* and I had never heard of Brahman, *samsara* and so forth. I did not yet know that there was an essence or impersonal real underlying everything and that *Isvara* and I were both identical. Later, at Tiruvannamalai, as I listened to the *Ribhu Gita* and the other sacred books, I learnt all this and

found that the books were analysing and naming what I had felt intuitively without analysis or name."

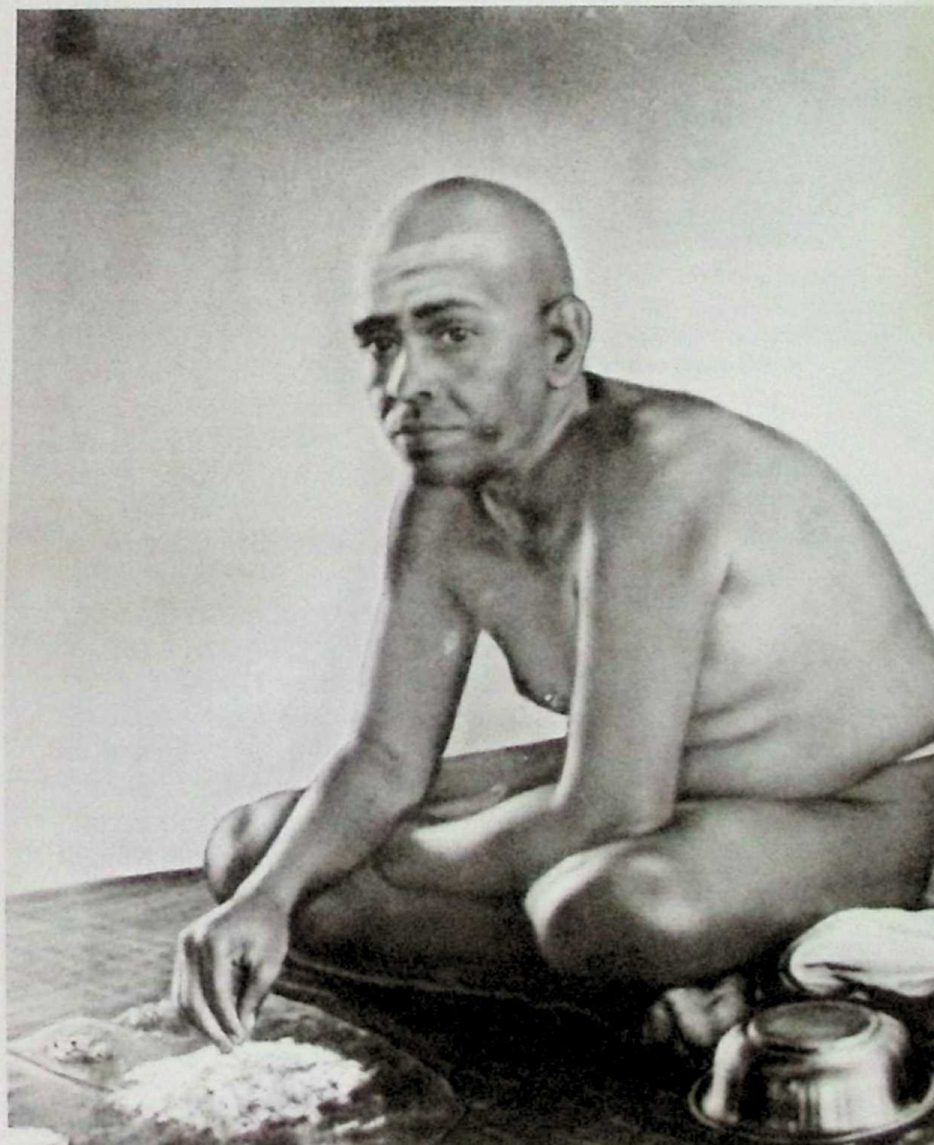
What has been said above is to encapsulate the teachings of the great saint and the words of some of his prominent disciples. That though, may not be enough. Journeys have to start. Maybe what is said can be a source of inspiration to an aspirant to set out on a journey. The destination will surely be reached. The only rider would be that in the journey, the aspirant has to be still - *Chumma Iru*. We talk of the Manu Dharma Shastra and other codes as being codes of law to regulate society. Can there be a better way to regulate the mind than the teachings of this humble seer? To end with the words of Eckhart Tolle, "Points to the possibility of finding true happiness." We have a responsibility to make ourselves happy and in turn, others too. In that lies *Dharma*.

Vikram Ramakrishnan is an advocate practising in the Madras High Court.

• **DAINTY EATER:**

Sri Ramana Maharshi ate elegantly and never wasted his food - PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM





'Bit film' - a photographic journey

As conservator of the archival photographic and film material of Sri Ramanasramam, Karthik shares his journey of The Unexpected

▪ V. KARTHIK ▪

My earliest connections to Sri Ramana Maharshi were with his images. Apart from images, of which I have been a constant student, I knew little else at the time the seva began. I was seeking "the fine print", inspired by the works of the great photographic masters. I knew nothing about a "spiritual world" or a "spiritual path". I was content and happy to see magnificent tones emerge on the print, a well-made photograph, an effort that helped the cause, nothing more.

Professional photographers in those days (when roll film was both scarce and expensive) would store the leftover films after a photo assignment. We would call these "bit" films. I would have bit films of various types and formats in the small refrigerator in my studio. Black and white films of various types, colour negative films, transparency films, etc inside refrigerators.

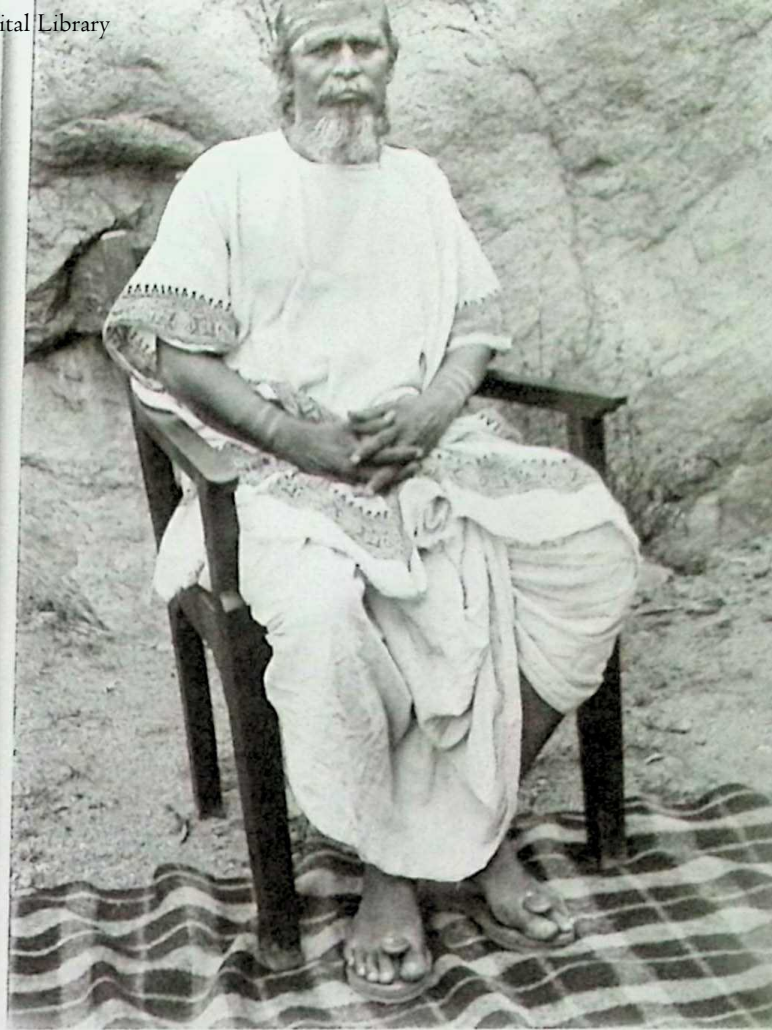
A visitor arrived at my studio from Sri Ramanasramam, guided by a common friend. He introduced himself as being from "the book stall" and wanted to know if I could help him with making negatives of the Maharshi, as the old negatives were becoming faded and damaged. This was my initial contact with the ashram. This was perhaps in 1988. As we had a lab, we could turn out this copy negative in a matter of twenty minutes. So the visitor would

often wait and collect the copy negative made with a 6 cms x 7 cms camera and ... bit film! It did not cost us anything to make this negative, so we never charged anything. We had also developed a new style of reproduction work, not in the studio but in the laboratory, where our enlarger would project the image on an upturned camera. It was quicker, easier, and offered more control over exposures.

Little did I know that this process would come in useful in the digital world twenty years later. In the early nineties, two gentlemen from the ashram, Dev Gogoi and Jim Lemkin, visited us with the intent of setting up a specialised unit in the ashram for photographic conservation and archival work. However, since most of the equipment was unavailable and could be purchased only through a very complex import route, this was abandoned. It was soon decided that I could help with the archival photography works of Sri Ramana Maharshi, and the work could take place at our studio.

Jim Lemkin had meticulously drawn up a blueprint and Dev Gogoi had handcrafted archival storage enclosures and catalogued the collection. Before these two gentlemen made the plan, a devotee, Sai Das, had attempted to curate the surviving images.

When I began the work, technology had advanced further and newer and better technologies were available (film



and chemistry). We basically made acid-free prints and copy negatives (free of excessive sodium sulphite levels) and had them mounted and boxed. Around the same time, Graham Boyd, a devotee from Scarborough, had already attempted to digitise some of the archival photographs of Sri Ramana.

By 1996, a new charter for the surviving images were drawn up. The old blueprint was retained in parts. A full-scale study of the various "film bases" was taken up. I carried hazardous chemicals over to the ashram and found a safe space where without spillage or contamination, the film base study could be executed.

It took about two months to complete this task. We discovered that over 90% of the images were of "cellulose nitrate" base. Cellulose nitrate is known to have brought down many museums and cinema theatres the world over, before Kodak stopped using this material and switched over to cellulose acetate... well, which had a different set of problems and is another story.

The fact is that more than 420 sq. inches of cellulose nitrate can spontaneously combust. Poof! The ashram had four times this volume, all stored in non-airconditioned spaces,

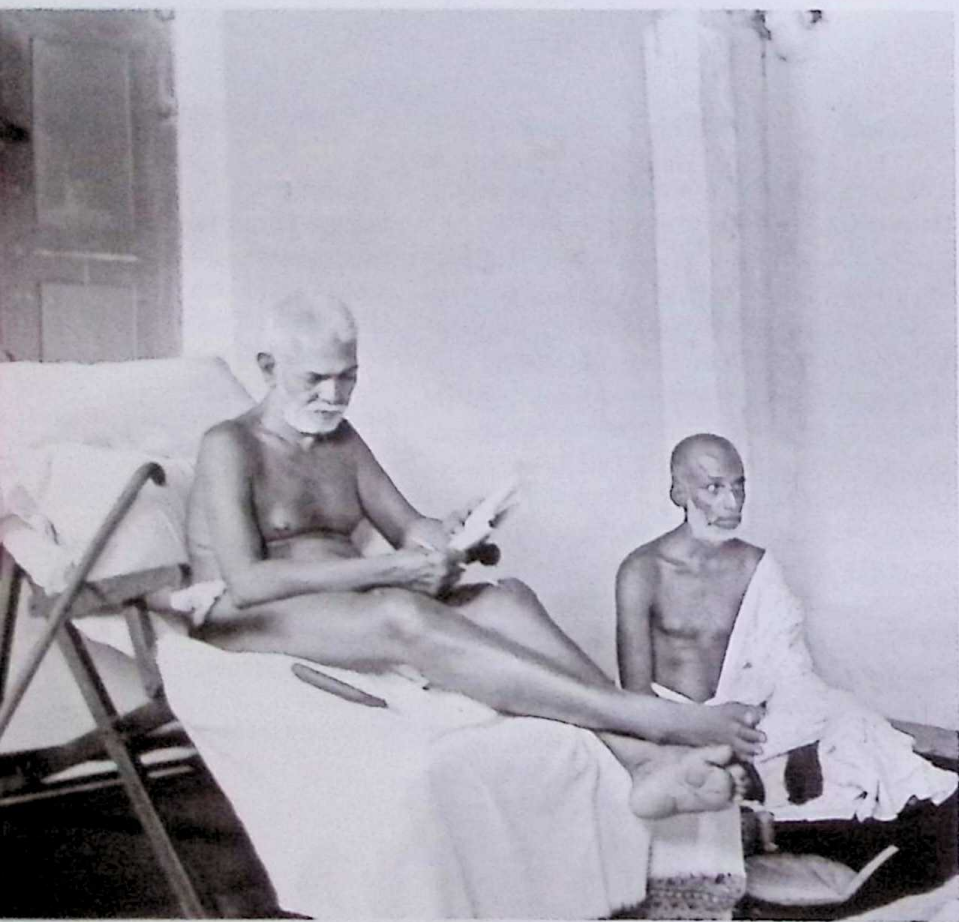
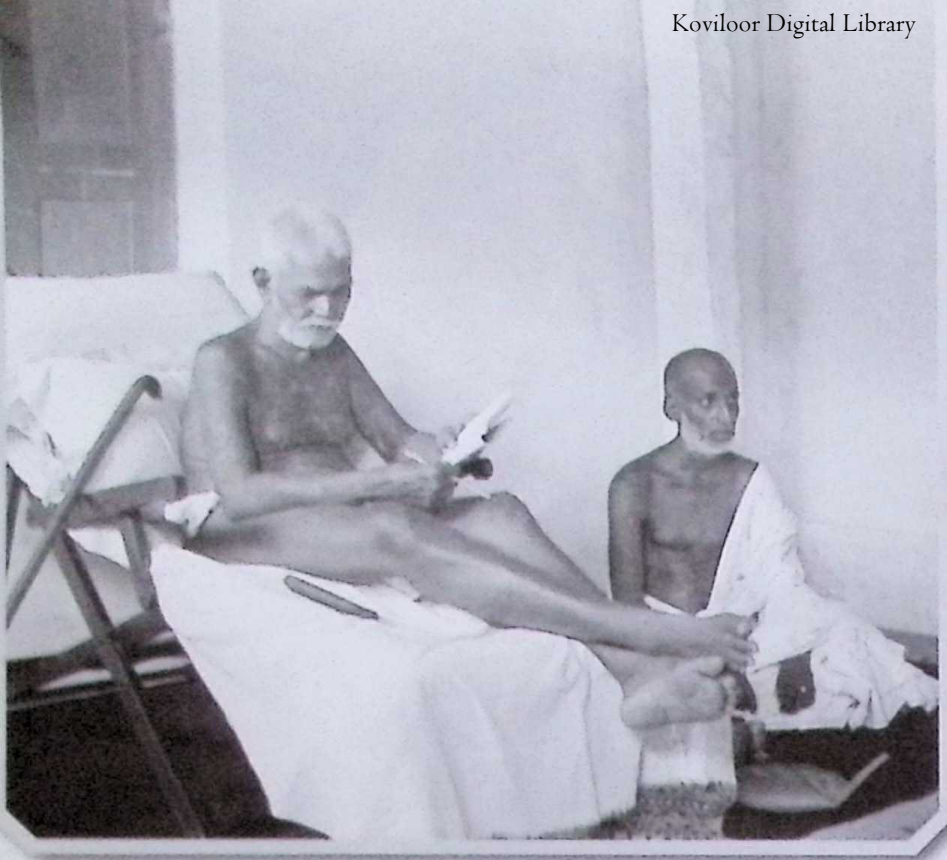
and it had survived the scorching Tiruvannamalai summers which can cross 42° C without fail. We are extremely fortunate to have these images.

The new protocol was isolation of the cellulose nitrate negatives. One thing was clear. They should not be used any longer for any purpose whatsoever. So the next step was to make full toned, just-as-the-original, "legally viable" copies of each image. This was done. We made an "interpositive", which is the preservation master, and a contact copy negative, which could be the "working negative" for all future uses.

The originals belonging to the Sri Ramanasramam were all converted to large format film copies, archivally treated and stored in safe enclosures. Parallely, acid-free prints were made, stored in conservation mats, interleaved for protection and stored in archival boxes at 21° C at 40% humidity in their archives. The last step was the digitisation of the images. After comparing scanned samples from four institutions and doing a blind rating test, our home-grown scanner built on the principle of projecting an aerial image (as in 1988 with the bit films) came out right on top, and we digitised all the surviving images to 80 mega pixels each.

★ **SUPERB RESTORATION:** The picture (left) of Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, coated with tar around it, was restored, sans tar, by photographer V. Karthik and his team in a meticulous exercise that lasted several weeks. They gently applied appropriate solvents. On the right is the restored picture.

- PHOTOS:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM



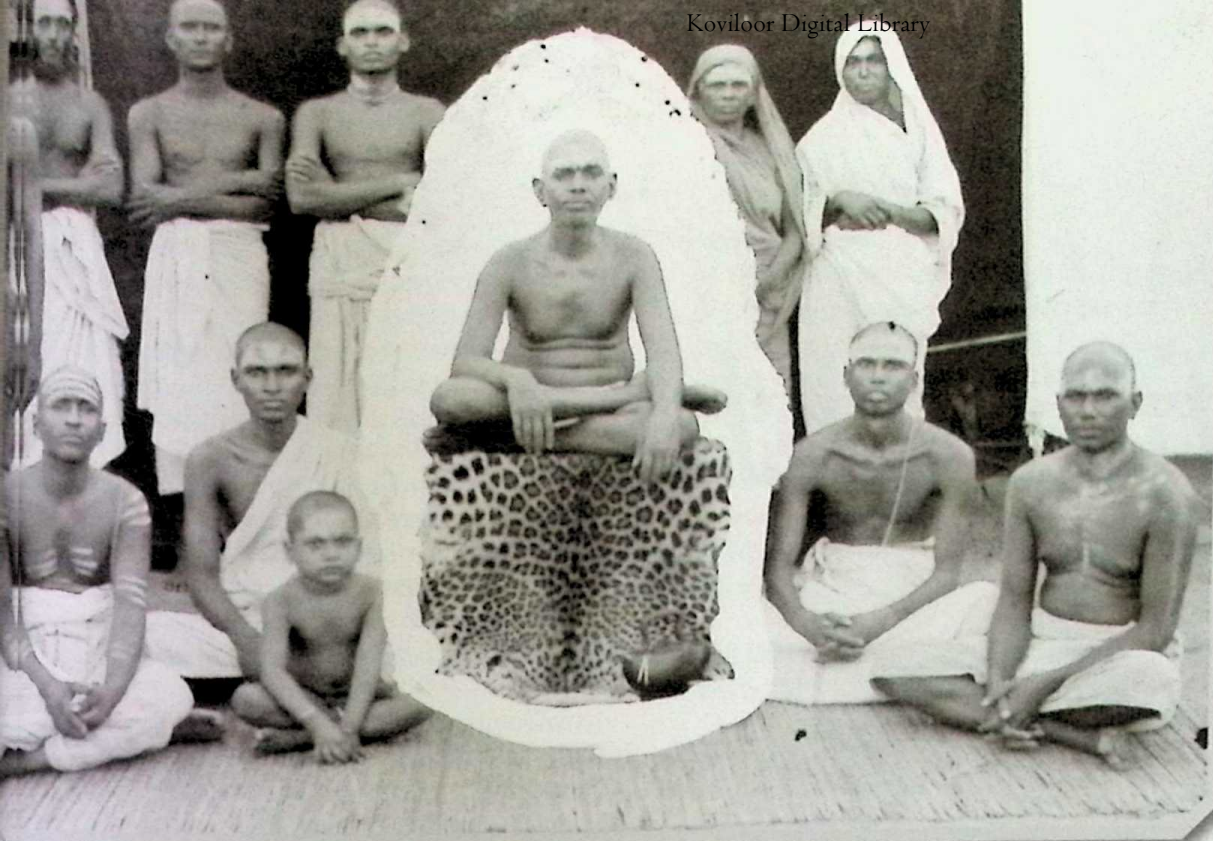
• **DIGITAL FUNGUS CLEANING:** The original negative portraying Sri Ramana Maharshi was lit with mildly coloured light, which illuminated the fungal colony on the negative and the fungus was subtracted by using an appropriate coloured filter. - PHOTOS: SRI RAMANASRAMAM

The digital journey offered new thrills and possibilities. We could clean out fungus digitally in cases where they could not be removed physically. We could knock out scratches from old black and white films (70-80 years old). We could recover images which were otherwise unusable due to blemishes and damage. Some examples are: Digital scratch removal (without photoshop). By using diffusers and selective focusing, the thousands of scratches on the original image disappeared to present a fully usable image

When technology could not be used in some cases, common sense helped. Like with the two glass plate images coated with tar (in those days the printing presses did this for cutout purposes). We had to experiment with a variety of solvents and finally hit upon the right combination that would dissolve the tar but not harm the emulsion.

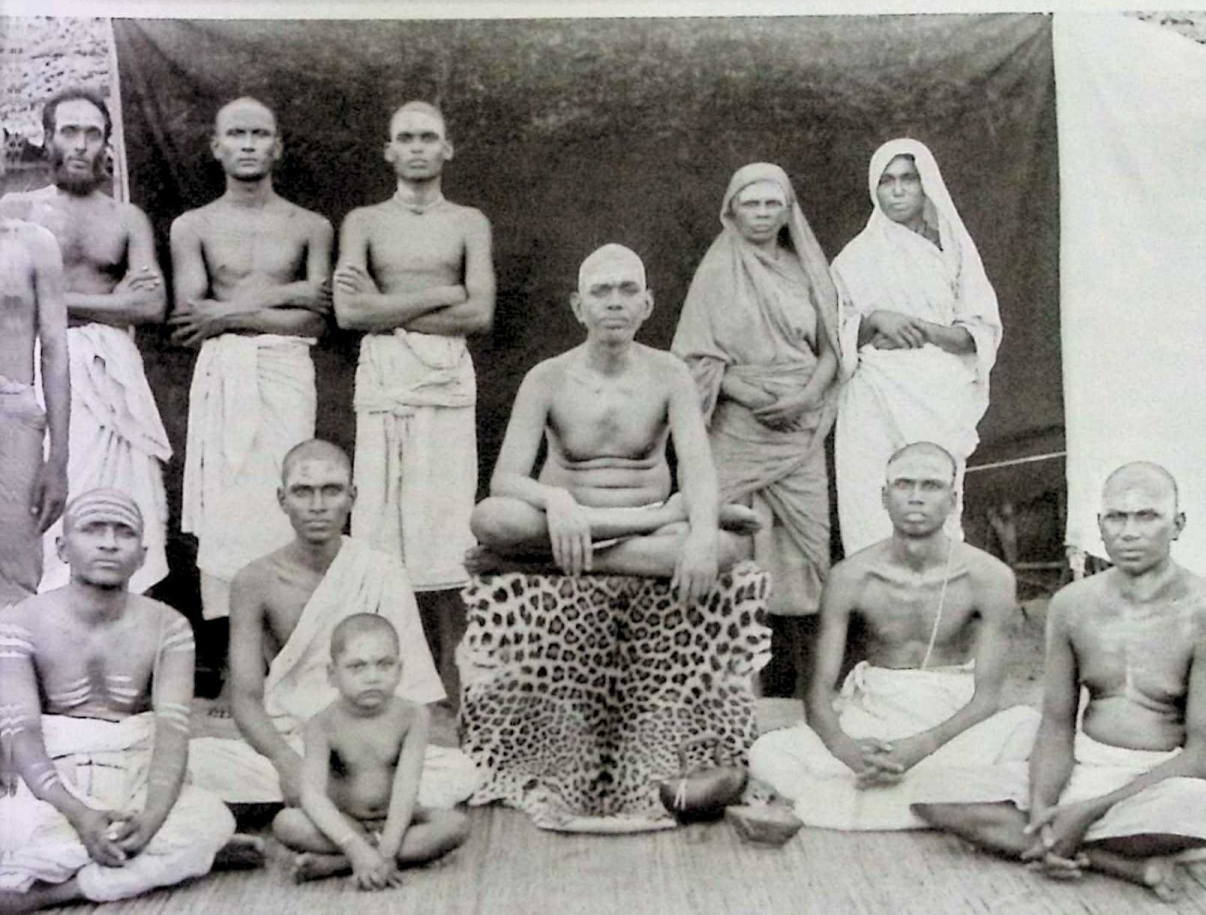
Today, the archival works of the Sri Ramanasramam is almost completed... All the originals and copies, prints and films have been secured at the custom-designed enclosures at reasonable and consistent humidity and temperature, thanks to the efforts of Bhagavan's devotees: T.N. Venkataraman who started it all, V.S. Ramanan, V.S. Mani, Dennis Hartel, Sai Das, Krishnan, Mugilan, Joan Greenblatt and Matthew Greenblatt, Jim Lemkin, Dev Gogoi, Graham Boyd, Sahaya, Doug and Toddy Munson, Siva Subramanian, Thyagarajan, John Maynard, Sujatha Shankar Kumar, Suresh Menon, Raju Ravichandran, Satyajit Dhananjayan, S. Ramesh, and V. Gopinathan.

The work would be executed in batches. It was imperative that we work with a standardised raw materials for the purpose of accuracy and consistency. Sometimes we would run out of materials mid-batch. We would subsequently worry that we may have to re-do the entire batch. We would take a lunch break and by the time we resumed work, all the raw materials required would be waiting for us. They would have flown halfway round the world and arrive at our doorstep in the nick of time. The Unexpected prevailed



• (Top):
Photographer
V. Karthik and his
team removed the
tar in the top picture,
using appropriate
solvents. But the
emulsion was not
harmful. Below is the
restored picture.

- PHOTOS:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM



at every turn, needed equipment would arrive, needed help would present itself. Needed funds would arrive... all without asking...

This close to the end of the Restoration Project, I cannot say that my journey was only about "the fine print" - tones, light, shade, location and composition. It was both an outer and inner journey.

The Maharshi's images took me through so much uncharted territory, for which I was often unprepared. Somehow, reassurance, confidence and knowledge would come out of Nowhere as if Bhagavan himself had given his blessings to all involved.

V. Karthik is photographer,
Sri Ramanasramam.



A blessed friendship

The meeting between Narayana Guru, Kerala's social reformer and Ramana Maharshi...

▪ T. S. S. ▪

T

he meeting of Narayana Guru, Kerala's noted social reformer, with Ramana Maharshi in 1917 at Skandasramam on the Arunachala hill, was an important event that has not received the attention it deserves. Biographers of Ramana from the West have given it a short shrift. However, the fact remains that Narayana Guru and Ramana Maharshi hit it off. They developed a special relationship which saw them respecting each other. After they had lunch together at Skandasramam, Narayana Guru composed a poem called *Nivritti Panchakam* in five stanzas in Sanskrit, praising the exalted status of Ramana's *sahaja samadhi*.

When T.V. Chandramouli, a senior staff of Sri Ramanasramam, took us to Skandasramam, he was keen that this writer do a story about the meeting between Narayana Guru and Ramana. In his book, *Timeless in Time, Sri Ramana Maharshi*, A.R. Natarajan says that Narayana Guru's ashram at Varkala had several branches in Tamil Nadu including one at Kanchipuram. One of his disciples named Achutananda would often visit Ramana. This would prompt Narayana Guru to humourously remark, "He must have received Rs. 5 from someone, and gone straightway to Tiruvannamalai!"

When Narayana Guru visited his ashram's Kanchipuram branch called

Narayana Seva Samiti, his disciple there, Govindananda Giri, suggested that the Guru should meet Ramana. The Guru agreed. He was staying at Sadhukkal Chatram in Tiruvannamalai, which was being managed by a scholar-devotee from Kerala. Meanwhile, Palaniswami who hailed from Kerala and was a faithful attendant of Ramana, was also visiting the Sadhukkal Chatram. Palaniswami requested Narayana Guru to meet the Maharshi. The meeting between the two spiritual leaders finds elaborate mention in the books written by V. Ganesan, grandson of Nagasundaram (alias Niranjanananda), who was Ramana's younger brother. After the social reformer agreed to meet Ramana, Narayana Guru and his disciples climbed the hill to reach Skandasramam. Ramana was seated in the verandah. Narayana Guru stood looking intently looking at the Maharshi. "The Guru silently observed Bhagavan and the activities taking place around him," says Ganesan in his book titled, *Moments Remembered, Reminiscences of Bhagavan Ramana*, published by Sri Ramanasramam. People were paying their respects to Ramana, who sat silently and was "beaming with blissful joy". Narayana Guru then sat under a mango tree.

When it was time for lunch, Ramana came out and invited Narayana Guru in Malayalam for lunch with him. Ramana told him, "*Endha, yengalode uunu*

kazhichu koodē." (Come and have lunch with us.) Narayana Guru responded in Tamil, "Aha! Maharshi's *prasadam* *saapidalam!*" (Oh, yes, we will share Maharshi's *prasada*.) They sat next to each other and had lunch. As was his habit after lunch, Ramana went for a walk on the hill. Narayana Guru sat in the shelter under the mango tree. He asked a disciple, "Should we not present him with something?" When the disciple was wondering what fruits would be available there, Narayana Guru asked him to bring a paper and pencil.

Ganesan says, "He [Narayana Guru] wrote five verses in Sanskrit with the title *Nivritti Panchakam*." When Bhagavan returned, Narayana Guru went and sat next to him, and placed the piece of paper on Bhagavan's seat. He said, "They have come to take me to Esanya Mutt. I have to go now." Bhagavan nodded in assent. Narayana Guru stood up, and for a few moments looked straight into Bhagavan's eyes. He then said, "*Angane Agatte*." (Let it be so.)

While going down the hill, Narayana Guru told his disciples, "The Maharshi is a *raja sarpam*, a king cobra." Then he summoned two of his disciples, one a wealthy man and another a scholar, and told them, "Maharshi's spiritual state is such that even a single glance from him is enough to liberate anyone. Now he remains unknown to the world, like a lamp inside a pot. He should be recognised so that his spiritual treasure is plundered by many seekers..." (From *Ramana Periya Puranam* by V. Ganesan.) He told them to spread Ramana's teachings. When Narayana Guru went back to Kerala, he composed another five stanzas called *Municharya Panchakam* in Sanskrit and sent the composition to Ramana,

who appreciated it.

When Narayana Guru fell ill, Ramana sent Kunju Swamy with a lemon and asked him to give it to him. Narayana Guru was in tears that Ramana sent him this *prasada*. When Narayana Guru attained *siddhi*, Ramana told Kunju Swamy how the tomb should be built. Ramana said, "Narayana Guru was a *purna purusha*, a fully blossomed person."

• SRI NARAYANA GURU (in the picture), Kerala's social reformer and Sri Ramana Maharshi bonded well when they met each other in Skandasramam in 1917. They had lunch together.

- PHOTO:
THE HINDU ARCHIVES





The story of the Ramanasramam idli

The South Indian breakfast staple, the idli, special at Sri Ramanasramam with a flavour all its own, has its own history

• T. S. S. •

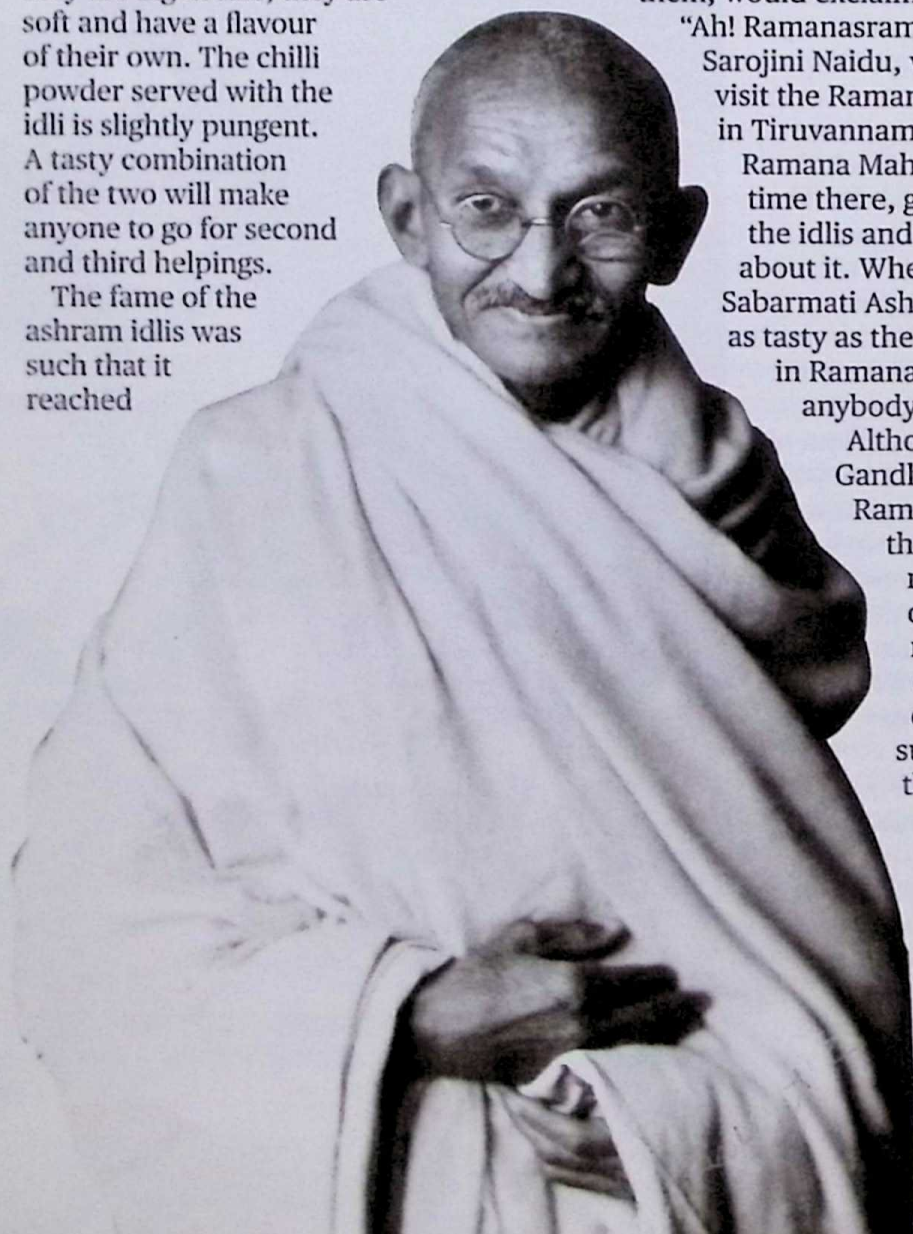
The idlis served as breakfast in the dining hall of Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, are special. Although they are big in size, they are soft and have a flavour of their own. The chilli powder served with the idli is slightly pungent. A tasty combination of the two will make anyone to go for second and third helpings.

The fame of the ashram idlis was such that it reached

Mahatma Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat, thanks to freedom-fighter Sarojini Naidu. On rare occasions when idlis were served in the Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhiji, who loved eating them, would exclaim with glee, "Ah! Ramanasramam idlis!"

Sarojini Naidu, who used to visit the Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai to meet Ramana Maharshi and spend time there, greatly liked the idlis and told Gandhiji about it. Whether the Sabarmati Ashram idlis were as tasty as their counterparts in Ramanasramam is anybody's guess.

Although Mahatma Gandhi never met Ramana Maharshi, they had a healthy respect for each other. Ramana may not have explicitly expressed support to the freedom struggle but his heart was in it. He was aware of the developments in the freedom movement



• **MAHATMA GANDHI:** Although Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Ramana Maharshi never met, they admired each other's work.

• PHOTO:
THE HINDU ARCHIVES

and followed what was happening. Behind his couch, a big portrait of Mahatma Gandhi hung from the wall. Adjacent to it, there was a calendar with a photograph of Jawaharlal Nehru and a map of India.

Dr. Venkat Ramanan, who will take over as the president of Ramanasramam in 2020, says, "Although Bhagavan was aware of the Independence struggle, his spiritual path was that of *jnana marga*... Rajendra Prasad (freedom fighter and first President of India) was his devotee. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi used to send freedom fighters to the ashram when they were emotionally burnt out, to recharge their spiritual batteries. Sarojini Naidu and Jinnah had spent time at the ashram. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was a devotee.

"Professor K. Swaminathan (who was the Editor of *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*) was a great devotee of Bhagavan..."

Indeed, there were several Gandhians among the core disciples of Ramana. Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, a man of monumental scholarship in Sanskrit and Telugu, dreamt of *swaraj*. Till his death, he was committed to achieving *swaraj*. It was Ganapati Muni who bestowed the title "Bhagavan Sri Ramanana Maharshi" on Ramana in 1907. Ramanatha Dikshitar or Ramanatha Brahmachari, was a great devotee of Mahatma Gandhi. Brahmachari stayed with Ramana in the Virupaksha cave, Skandasramam and the present-day ashram. He was a staunch Gandhian. He used a *charka* to weave his cloth. He spun a *khadar* dhoti from his *charka* and presented it to Mahatma Gandhi when the latter came to Chennai.

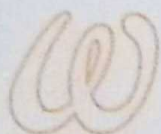




Did Bhagavan meet Subramania Bharathi?

A narrative from the published diary of a disciple suggests that Subramania Bharathi did come to meet Ramana

• T. S. S. •



While it is well known that Mahatma Gandhi never met Sri Ramana Maharshi, and that no meeting took place between Ramana and the Paramacharya Sri



• MAHAKAVI
SUBRAMANIA
BHARATHI sat in
front of Sri Ramana
Maharshi for an
hour but they never
spoke to each other.

• PHOTO:

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

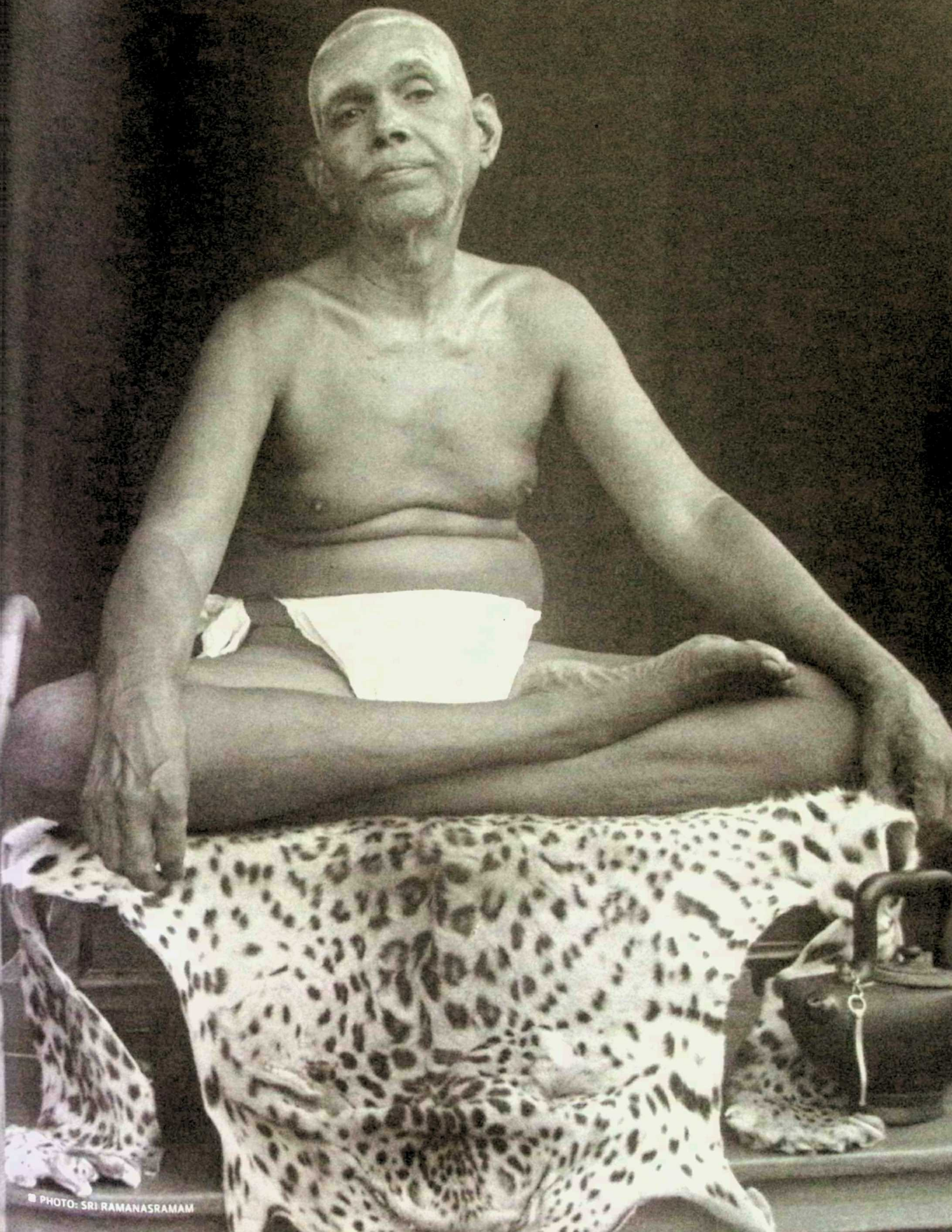
Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi of the Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt, it looks as if poet Subramania Bharathi met Ramana. But they never spoke to each other.

When G.V. Subbaramayya, an ardent disciple of Ramana, asked the latter whether Subramania Bharathi had ever come to meet him, Ramana gave this account on June 3, 1946: "I think he did once. It was when we were on the hill. One evening when only Sivayya [the Mauni Swamy of Courtalam], who is dead now, was with me, someone came and sat for nearly an hour before me and then went away without saying a word. Later, when I saw pictures of Bharathi, I thought it must have been he."

Freedom-fighter Rajendra Prasad, who became the first President of India, was quiet when he stayed at the ashram. Industrialist and freedom-fighter, Jamnalal Bajaj, who came with Rajendra Prasad, did all the talking for the latter. Yet another freedom-fighter, S. Satyamurti, spent time at the ashram. He too never spoke at all.

Ramana said, "When the [Right Honourable] Srinivasa Sastri came, he asked me some questions but when I put to him counter-questions, he would not answer them. He wanted to go his own way. I wanted to take him inward, and he wanted to pull me outward."

*(From Day by Day with Bhagavan,
From the Diary of A. Devaraja Mudaliar.)*



An endearing relationship

Mahan Seshadri Swamy was lured by Arunachala, much as Sri Ramana Maharshi was. A look at the spiritual persona of this renunciate who had an endearing relationship with Ramana

• T. S. S. •

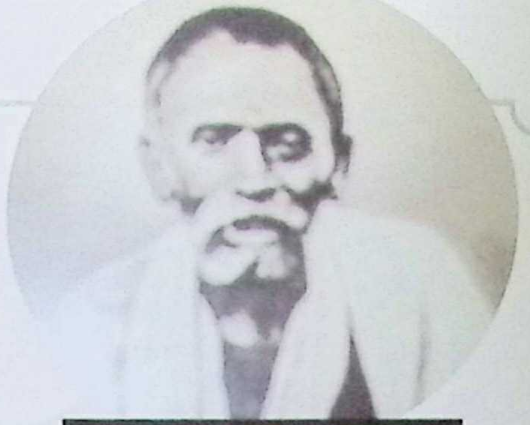
Of the several hundred scholars, statesmen, powerful men, devout women, wealthy persons and unlettered folks who gravitated towards Sri Ramana Maharshi, it is edifying to study two blemishless relationships, the one forged between the saint Seshadri Swamy and Ramana, and the other, between Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni and the Maharshi. There was a special warmth in the two relationships, with Ramana openly admiring both Seshadri Swamy and Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni for their spiritual attainments and scholarship. While Seshadri Swamy was elder to Ramana by nine years, Ganapati Sastry was senior in age to the Maharshi by a year.

There is truth in the analysis of several biographers and devotees of Ramana, that if Mahan Seshadri Swamy had not found Venkataraman, not yet 17 years old in 1896, meditating for several weeks in the dank, dark underground vault of the Patala Lingam shrine in Arunachaleswara temple, Ramana would have passed unnoticed. It was Seshadri Swamigal, who protected the young Venkataraman, by chasing away the urchins who often rained stones at the latter when he was in a deep meditation in the 1000-pillared *mantapa* in

the temple premises. Seshadri Swamy was quick to realise that the teenage ascetic was a realised soul. After Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni bestowed the title of "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi" on Venkataraman, Seshadri Swamy was fond of calling the Maharshi "Ramana Swamy".

Seshadri Swamy was born at Vazhur, near Tiruvannamalai, on January 2, 1870 to Varadharajan and Maragadhammal. Seshadri's father died when he was ten years old and his mother passed away some time later. His uncle and aunt brought him up at Kanchipuram. B.V. Narasimha Swami, in his book titled, *Self-Realisation*, says that Seshadri Swamy was proficient in Sanskrit and had learnt the Vedas, the *Pancha Kavyas*, Sanskrit grammar and so on. By the time he was 14, he had studied many important works in Sanskrit literature and could speak fluently in Sanskrit. He was a good singer and was knowledgeable about the theory of music. He was devoted to Goddess Kamakshi of Kanchipuram. He would circumambulate Goddess Kamakshi's sanctum day and night, reciting *Mukapanchasati* or the *Kamakarishid mantra* from *Narayanopanishad*. He would take off to cremation grounds to perform spiritual practices.

As in the case of Venkataraman, the lure of Arunachala was strong for



• Mahan Sri Seshadri Swamigal

the young Seshadri too, who reached Tiruvannamalai in 1890 at the age of 20. "For the next 40 years of his life, it was the home of this 'homeless' one," says, A.R. Natarajan in his book called, *Timeless in Time, Sri Ramana Maharshi*. Ramana did not leave Tiruvannamalai or the Arunachala Hill for 54 years; he came from Madurai to Tiruvannamalai in 1896 and attained *mahanirvana* in 1950. Natarajan adds that during Seshadri Swamy's 40 years of stay at Tiruvannamalai, thousands of its residents were witness to his child-like nature and his spiritual power. "His outer conduct was, however, an enigma."

Many people thought that Seshadri Swamy was insane. For he would be seen sprinting in the streets of Tiruvannamalai. He would not accept tasty food from a wealthy home, but willingly receive stale gruel from a poor family. He would eat food with beggars in choultries meant for them. He wore dirty clothes, his hair was dishevelled and his appearance unkempt. He would roam the streets with oil dripping from his body. He was a mind-reader and would accurately fathom the thoughts of people. There were many people who were aware of his spiritual attainments and they called him "mahan" or great man.

Seshadri Swamy kept in touch with the young Swamy

when the latter stayed for a few months at Pavazhakkunru in 1898.

When the young Swamy lived in the Virupaksha cave from 1899 to 1916, Seshadri Swamy would invariably send people who came to him for spiritual instruction to Ramana, if he came to know that they were devotees of Ramana. He would direct them to stick to Ramana till the last. According to Narasimha Swami, "...Not infrequently, on such occasions, he [Seshadri Swamy] would either identify himself with Ramana Swamy or point out that there was really no difference in serving either of the two." For instance, Somasundara Swamy, who was Ramana's devotee, was in a dilemma to whom he should go for further spiritual instruction. He approached Seshadri Swamy, who read his thoughts instantly. Seshadri Swamy categorically told Somasundara Swamy: "Go to Ramana". When Somasundara Swamy appeared indecisive, the *mahan* was emphatic, "Go, go, go to Ramana. Don't tarry here."

Lakshmi Ammal of Tiruchuzhi, who had stayed with Echammal, a staunch devotee of Ramana, had served Ramana for some days, and was yearning to meet Seshadri Swamy. A few days later, she found Seshadri Swamy in the Arunachaleswara temple. He read her thoughts immediately and queried her in Tamil, "How does it matter whether you are here or there?" (meaning, whether you serve me or Ramana?).

But Seshadri Swamy failed to read Ramana's mind. When Ramana was staying in the Virupaksha cave in 1908, the *mahan* arrived there, sat in front of Ramana and gazed



• The entrance leading to the Sri Seshadri Swamigal temple, situated close to Sri Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai.

- PHOTO: C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

at him for several minutes. One version says that the *mahan*, unable to read what was swimming in the ken of Ramana's mind, said, "I don't see anything cooking in his mind." Another version says that he remarked, "It is not clear what this person is thinking."

Subramania Mudaliar, a wealthy landlord and his wife, had spent much of their wealth in feeding sadhus. They would take food to Ramana, and to Seshadri Swamy, if they could find him. Although Subramania Mudaliar was generous-hearted and pious, he wanted to possess more property.

This annoyed Seshadri Swamy, who told him, "You see, my younger brother has an income of Rs.10,000, and my income is Rs.1,000. Why don't you earn at least Rs.100?" His reference to younger brother was to Ramana Swamy and the "income" was tantamount to "spiritual attainment". The incident again shows the esteem that the *mahan* had for his younger brother.

That Seshadri Swamy had attained Self-realisation was clear when he told Natanananda Swami, a devotee of Ramana, "After one rejects all objects one

after another as transient and unreal, that which remains is the Self." When a relative took an aim at him for his forgetfulness, he sallied. "Mine is the forgetfulness of the illusions of the world and not the real Brahman."

He often visited Ramana when the latter stayed in the Virupaksha cave from 1899 to 1916. They would have lunch together.

Seshadri Swamy attained *mahasamadhi* on January 4, 1929 when he was 59-years-old. His body was interred a bit away from the foot of the hill. All of Tiruvannamalai went into mourning. Ramana Maharshi remained at the funeral till the *mahan's* body was placed in the *samadhi*. Adjacent to Sri Ramanasramam on the Chengam Road in Tiruvannamalai town is the *mahan's samadhi*, which is now a temple. According A.R. Natarajan, "People of Tiruvannamalai have not forgotten the endearing relationship between Mahan Seshadri Swamy and Bhagavan Ramana."

The *mahan* is revered in Tiruvannamalai to this day. His picture is taken in a procession through the streets of the town on the anniversary of his death.



At the feet of the Bhagavan

Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, a scholar of great reckoning, discovered his spirituality at the feet of the Bhagavan

• T. S. S. •

K

avyakanta Ganapati Muni wore his colossal scholarship in Sanskrit and Telugu literature lightly on his shoulders. Even before he was out of his teens, he had mastered the four Vedas, 109 Upanishads, epics, *puranas*, *itihasas* and various literary works in Sanskrit and Telugu. The relationship that was forged between Ramana Maharshi and Ganapati Muni was burnished in the smithy of admiration for each other's scholarship and spiritual quest.

Ganapati Muni was born in Andhra Pradesh in 1878. He had a phenomenal memory. At the age of ten, he had composed a verse in Sanskrit, prepared almanacs and learnt books on Sanskrit grammar. He was an *ashtavadhani* - a person who can do eight things simultaneously. He was deep into astronomy and *gyotisha sastra* too. From the age of 18, he was a *tapasvi*, obsessed with performing *tapas* (penances) in various sacred places across India.

It is interesting to know how Ganapati Muni, named Ayyala Somayajulu Ganapati Sastri by his parents, was awarded the title of "Kavyakanta" when he was just 22 years old, in 1900. He was in Varanasi (Benares/Kasi) to perform *tapas* when he was 20 and came to the attention of Sanskrit scholars there for his skill in composing poems in Sanskrit at will. So they sent him to take part in a *panditha sabha* or a grand assembly of scholars at Navadweepa in Bengal. He proved his multi-faceted genius there. When a mathematician asked

him to multiply a six-digit number by another six-digit number, he came up with the correct answer. A poet recited the last two lines of Sanskrit verse and challenged the youth to compose the first two lines in the same metre. A musician hummed a rare *raga* and asked Ganapati to identify it. There were questions on astronomy. To all the questions, he came with the correct answers (From V. Ganesan's *Ramana Periya Puranam*.)

What dazzled the scholars was Ganapati Muni's outstanding ability to compose Sanskrit poems anytime anybody wanted him to do. The pandits estimated him to be next only to poet Kalidasa for his faculty in this department. So they conferred on him the title of "Kavyakanta" - "kavya" means an epic poem and "kanta" means neck. That is, Ganapati Muni could cough out poetry from his neck anytime he wanted to. In other words, he was a person in whose throat poetry resided.

After doing *tapas* in several holy places, Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni reached Tiruvannamalai in 1903. Having heard about Brahmana Swamy's (Ramana) spiritual instructions on *Who am I?*, Self-realisation and Self-enquiry, Ganapati Muni trekked up the Arunachala hill and reached Virupaksha cave where the young Swamy was staying. He saw Ramana immersed in a *nishtai*. Disappointed by Ramana's silence, he went away. Ganapati Muni came back a few months later but he and the Brahmana Swamy did not communicate with each other.

Ganapati Muni returned to Virupaksha cave on November 18, 1907. He was being tormented by doubts whether his mastery of Sanskrit epics, *puranas*, the Vedas and the Upanishads and his constant chanting of Namasivaya and Srividya *mantras* were a waste because he had not yet understood the true meaning of *tapas* and God had not appeared before him. On that day, he saw the Brahmana Swamy seated outside the cave. The Swamy recognised Ganapati Muni and looked steadily into his eyes. The Muni was filled with a great sense of peace and bliss. It was a moment of indescribable joy for him. He prostrated before the young Swamy, clutched his feet, and cried, "I have read all that has to be read. I have understood the essence of the *Sastras*. I have incessantly performed *tapas*. But I have not understood what *tapas* is. Please enlighten me on what true *tapas* is and what its nature is."

The Brahmana Swamy then broke his 11 years of silence and gave his first, oral *upadesa* to Ganapati Muni. He said, "If one watches from where this notion 'I' springs, the mind is absorbed into that. That is *tapas*."

"When a *mantra* is repeated, if attention is directed to the source where the *mantra* sound is produced, the mind is absorbed in that. That is *tapas*."

The Swamy's reply satisfied Ganapati Muni and stilled his tormented mind. A sense of peace flooded his being. He accepted the Brahmana Swamy as his guru. He meditated at the feet of his guru till the evening of that day. He asked Palaniswami, the faithful attendant of the Swamy, for the Swamy's name. When Palaniswami replied, "Venkataraman", Ganapati Muni shortened it to "Ramana" and bestowed the title of "Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi" on Venkataraman. From that day onwards, the world has addressed him simply as Bhagavan or the Maharshi.

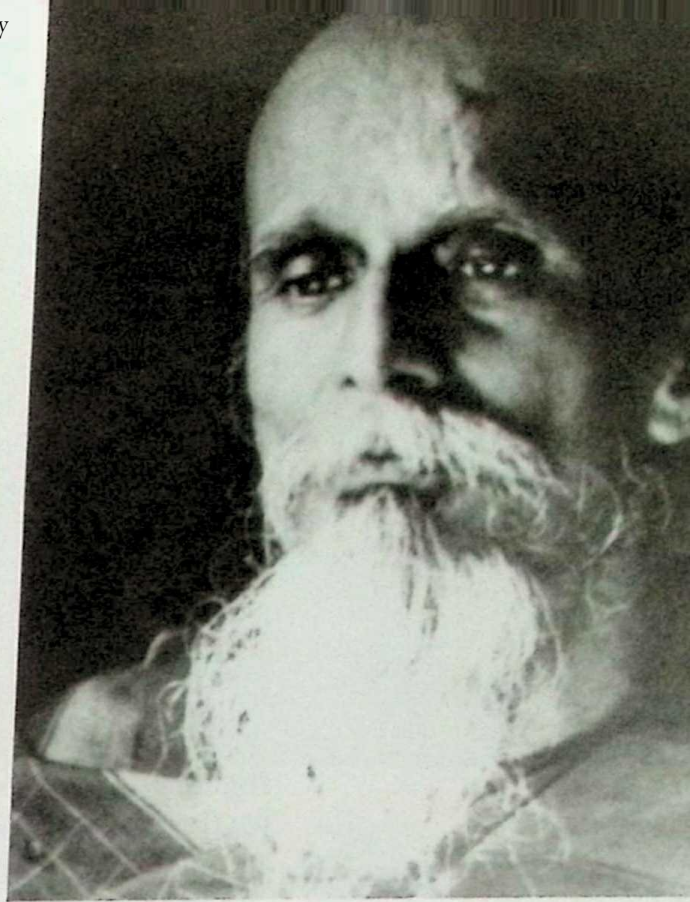
Ganapati Muni had his own contingent of 200 disciples. Many of them, including Devarata and Kapali Sastry, were Sanskrit scholars. He told all of them that they should accept Ramana as their guru.

N. Narasimhan, Supervisor, *The Hindu*, Chennai, who had studied Ganapati

Muni's life, says the Muni called both Ramana and the Saivite, poet-saint Tirugana Sambandar, *Dandam illaa thuravigal* in Tamil, that is, *sanyasins/sages* who do not have the sacred staff. The Muni said Kumarila Bhattar, Tirugnana Sambandar and Ramana were incarnations of Karthikeyan. In fact, the Muni, punning on the word *dandam*, called Ramana *dandam illaa thuravi* and also a *Dhandapani* (another name for Muruga/Karthikeya). He composed *Forty Verses in Praise of Ramana* in Sanskrit.

Narasimhan said that Ramana could scarce believe that a person like Ganapati, with his monumental scholarship, could be so humble. Ramana had reverence for the Muni's colossal learning and would respectfully address him as "Nayana" ('father' in Telugu). They relished conversing in Telugu. Both got along famously. Ramana and the Muni would often go for a walk together on the Arunachala hill. From January to March, 1908, Ramana, "Nayana" and a few other core disciples, stayed together at the Pachaiyammam temple premises. In 1917, Ramana answered many questions from the Muni on spiritual issues. The Muni recorded the questions and answers under the title *Ramana Gita* in 18 chapters, in 300 verses. "One cannot be too grateful to the Muni for this monumental work," says A.R. Natarajan in his book, *Timeless in Time*, published by Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning, Bengaluru.

The Muni was a Gandhian, deeply interested in the freedom struggle, obsessed with Bharat attaining *swaraj* and building a resurgent Hindu religion. He attained *mahasamadhi* on July 25, 1936 in his ashram, near Kharagpur in Bengal. Ramana mourned the Muni's death.



• KAVYAKANTA
GANAPATI MUNI:
He bestowed the
title "Bhagavan Sri
Ramana Maharshi"
on Venkataraman
in 1907 at the
Virupaksha cave.

- PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM



The mystic saint who was a Ramana devotee

Yogi Ramsuratkumar was an unusual yogi, a devotee of Ramana, who called himself a "beggar"

▪ T. S. S. ▪



Everything about Sri Yogi Ramsuratkumar attracted attention. He had a palm-leaf fan, a sceptre-like staff and a piece of rope in one hand, and a coconut shell bowl in the other. He wore a dhoti in the traditional, orthodox style, a flowing *jubba* and a woollen shawl around his shoulders. The clothes were dirty - they had not been washed for several days. A turban sat on his head. He chain-smoked Charminar cigarettes. He readily laughed and it was a stentorian laughter. There was an innocent ring to it. When Yogi Ramsuratkumar raised both his hands high in blessing, his devotees were ecstatic. The miracles

that he performed, especially in curing his devotees' or their children's illnesses, were dime a dozen. He loved calling himself a beggar. Although he was from Uttar Pradesh, he spent much of his life in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu. In the 1990s, he set up an ashram in Tiruvannamalai town. He was a Ram Bhakt. He would often be chanting, "Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram." His credo was: "My father alone exists. Nothing else. Nobody else."

Yogi Ramsuratkumar was a mystic saint who was well known in Tamil Nadu and had a large following in the State. But what is not well known is that he was an earnest devotee of Sri Ramana Maharshi and had readily acknowledged that "Bhagavan Ramana was a principal influence in shaping this beggar to this state." He added, "The inner life of saints such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo, J. Krishnamurti and Swamy Ramdas is far, far removed from what we can externally perceive of them. They operate rooted in the eternal infinite, which can never be known. There is no individual there to report the differences!"

Yogi Ramsuratkumar was born in a village called Naradara, Ballia district, Uttar Pradesh, on December 1, 1918. Naradara is situated on the banks of the river Ganga near Varanasi. The constant presence of pilgrims, sadhus and saints on the Ganga impacted on the young

• A RAM BHAKT:
A sculpture of Yogi Ramsuratkumar in his ashram at Tiruvannamalai. He had acknowledged that "Bhagavan Ramana was the principal influence in shaping" him.

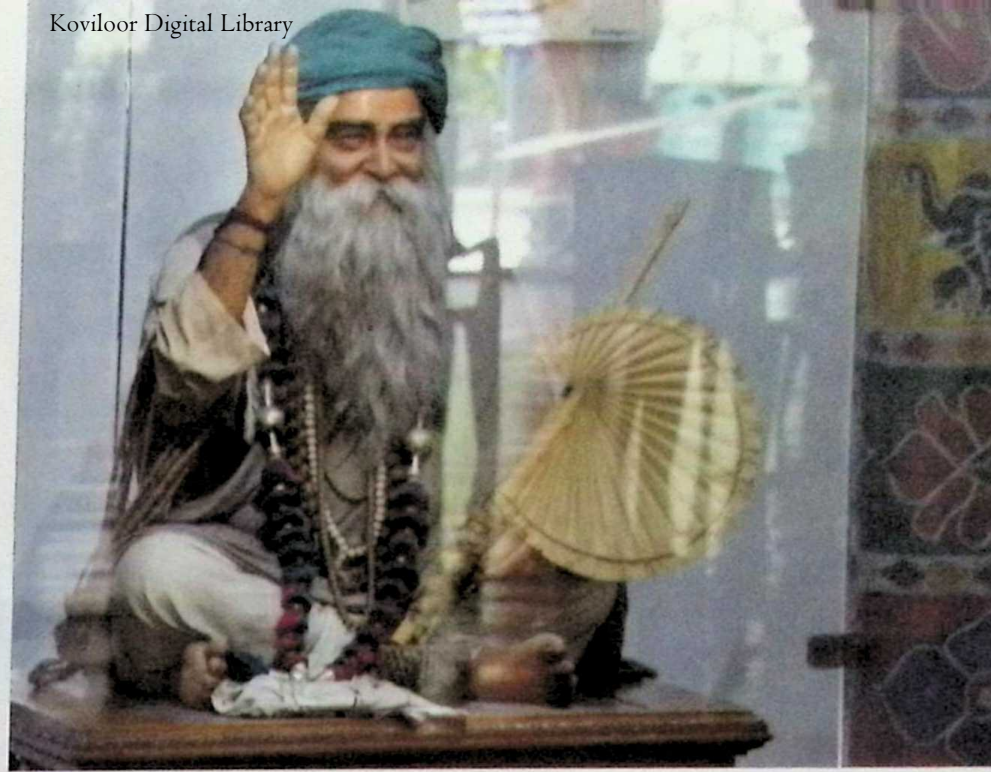
— PHOTO:
C. VENKATACHALAPATHY



Ramsuratkumar. He often visited the Kasi Vishwanath temple. After some years, he met a sadhu called Kapadia Baba who encouraged him to learn the *Tulsi Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. He became proficient in both these texts. Later, Kapadia Baba told Yogi Ramsuratkumar to seek a guru, travel to south India, and meet Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi.

In an excellent article that Ilaiyaraaja, has written in the “Yogi Ramsuratkumar Souvenir”, published in 1995 by the Yogi Ramsuratkumar Trust, Tiruvannamalai, the music composer says that the yogi first visited Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry (now called Puducherry) in 1949. He adds: “Then, he came to Sri Ramanasramam. In Bhagavan Ramana, he saw the height of spiritual perfection... He stayed there for two months and drenched himself in the peace of bliss that ever flowed from the Sage of Arunachala. Yogi Ramsuratkumar, in the meantime, met Swamy Ramdas of Kanhangad [Kerala].” V. Ganesan, in his book called *Ramana Periya Puranam*, describes what happened when the yogi arrived at Tiruvannamalai: “The first welcoming sight of the holy hill filled him with happiness. Brimming with nameless joy, he went to Ramanasramam. Bhagavan was seated on a platform and the whole atmosphere was filled with silence and peace. He went and sat in front of Bhagavan. A direct look from Bhagavan plunged him into a deep meditation...” In 1950, both Ramana and Aurobindo attained *mahanirvana*. So Yogi Ramsuratkumar went back to Swamy Ramdas in Kanhangad, who initiated him into the Ram Mantra. This changed the yogi’s life. As Ilaiyaraaja says, “... Swamy Ramdas became the guru of this “beggar”, as he henceforth chose to call himself.”

When Swamy Ramdas told the yogi to go back to Arunachala, the latter returned to Tiruvannamalai and stayed in Ramanasramam for many months and plunged into Self-Inquiry. He went a couple of times to his village in Uttar Pradesh and came back to Tiruvannamalai. From then on, he permanently stayed in Tiruvannamalai, staying in the Arunachaleswara temple



premises or a nearby residential houses. Whatever happened around him, he always termed it “the Lila of my father”. Ilaiyaraaja has written about an incident which the yogi remembered. A devotee asked Ramana whether a disciple should seek a fresh, living guru to continue his *sadhana* when his original guru had passed away before his disciple had succeeded in his *sadhana*. The Maharshi replied, “Not necessary. He can continue his *sadhana* and guidance would continue.” Then, why did Yogi Ramsuratkumar go to Swamy Ramdas when the Maharshi attained *siddhi*, somebody asked the Yogi. He responded that he had begun to realise that a higher power was expressing itself, using him as an instrument. “Ramana was a principal influence in shaping this beggar to this state. After he passed away, I did not see any conflict in going to Swamy Ramdas. It was Swamy Ramdas who initiated me and gave me this madness,” the yogi said.

V. Ganesan, grand-nephew of Ramana, deeply respected Yogi Ramsuratkumar. Ganesan has gone on record thus: “There was always the grace of Bhagavan and the blessings of his old devotees but it was Yogi Ramsuratkumar who moulded my life in many ways. All the travelling and the sharing I have done of Bhagavan’s teachings in the U.S. and elsewhere were done on his instructions.”

Yogi Ramsuratkumar attained *siddhi* in 2001. Ganesan was privileged to inter his coconut shell bowl, fan and sticks when the yogi’s body was placed in *samadhi*.

★ Yogi
Ramsuratkumar.
- PHOTO:
C. VENKATACHALAPATHY



Beyond life, thoughts, mind and body

Observations from
K. V. Subrahmonyan and
Dr. S. Ram Mohan

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

E

ighty-seven-year-old K.V. Subrahmonyan can dazzle you with his scholarship on Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Adi Sankara, Mandana Misra, Ramanuja, Madhavacharya, Vallabhacharya, Swamy Vivekananda, Seshadri Swamigal, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Bertrand Russel, Wittgenstein, J.M. Sullivan, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, J. Krishnamurti, Blaise Pascal, J.B.S. Haldane, Stephen Hawking and J.M. Sullivan. He is a polyglot who knows English, French, German, Sanskrit and Tamil among other languages. He has been living in the Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai

from 2005, when V.S. Ramanan, president of the ashram, asked him "to pack up and come here because you are getting old". Subrahmonyan had lived earlier in the ashram.

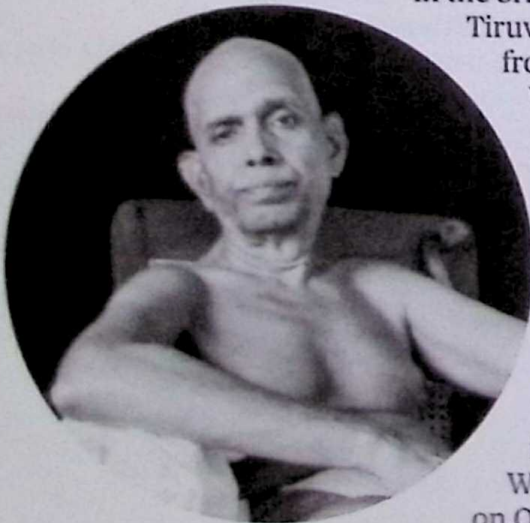
When we met him on October 5, 2019 in his cottage on the ashram

campus, he said, "Bhagavan has taken me to a realm beyond life, thoughts, mind, body, God and everything". He was earlier "a hermit

in the Himalayas", spending 15 years in Uttarakhand. He had done five years of social work among the mentally-challenged. He had stayed for seven years in an ashram in Delhi, spent time in Rishi Valley, Andhra Pradesh, worked with fishermen near Puducherry and so on.

When Dr. S. Ram Mohan joins Subrahmonyan in a discussion, sparks fly on *Advaita*, *Dvaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, *Tirumandiram* of Tirumoolar, Ramana Maharshi, etc. A highly learned man, Dr. Ram Mohan was a member, Railway Board. He has a Ph.D. in Strategic Studies and has earned post-graduate degrees in Chemistry, English, Mathematics, Physics, Sanskrit and Statistics. Dr. Ram Mohan is an erudite speaker on Buddhism and Ramana Maharshi. He is on the editorial board of *Mountain Path*, a quarterly journal published by Sri Ramanasramam.

According to Subrahmonyan, "Bhagavan was the most silent among the gurus and the most non-dual. Bhagavan's silence was the most eloquent." He was the most universal among the gurus. "Aristotle was an intellectual phenomenon. But here is one, whose silence, language, life and teachings addressed the most learned, the least learned, the brightest, the dullest." Ramana transcended speech and thought. He was a "*poorna purusha*". Seshadri Swamigal, a mind-reader, once sat in front of Ramana for many minutes in the Virupaksha cave



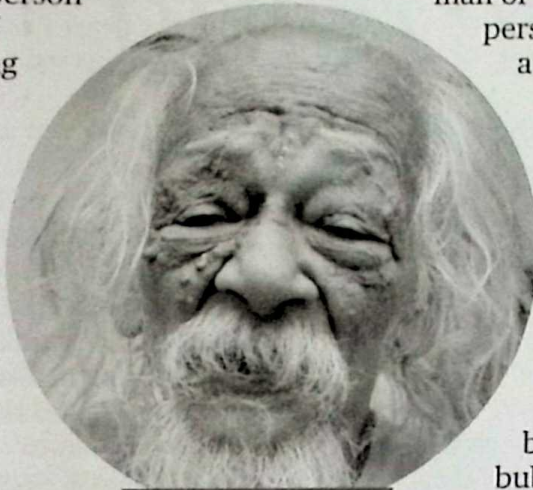
and tried to read his mind. He did not succeed. He said, "There is nothing. There is no mind at all."

Subrahmonyan said, "Gandhiji was the door to Bhagavan for me even more than Krishnaji [J.Krishnamurti]". Mahatma Gandhi was a man of deep silence and a person could follow him only when that person himself was a man of inner silence. "So long as you have the little 'I' within you, you cannot understand Gandhiji," Subrahmonyan argued. All along, the self-made scholar that Subrahmonyan is, was craving for non-duality. He said: "When I came to Bhagavan, my God! I wanted a teacher, a guru but here was Reality itself... When you talk about non-duality, even in Sankara, there was 0.0001 per cent duality. In Ramana, there was no duality... When I came to Bhagavan, I felt peace." For Ramana, *Advaita*, *Dvaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, etc. were one and the same, Subrahmonyan said. Besides, in the Maharshi's assessment, Adi Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhvacharya, Vallabhacharya were all great persons. They were all for Truth. They were Self-realised.

This prompted Dr. Ram Mohan to tell us a story. He told us that his driver once wanted to know, "You talk about *Advaita*, *Dvaita* and *Vishishtadvaita*. How does it matter?" This was Dr. Ram Mohan's explanation to him: "*Advaita*, *Dvaita* and *Vishishtadvaita* are like idlis, bajjis and vadas respectively. *Advaita* is like an idli. Both inside of the idli and its outside, the material is the same. The dough is the same. *Dvaita* is like a piece of bajji. Inside the bajji, there could be banana, potato or onion. Outside is the dough. So a bajji is made of two different kinds of raw materials. *Vishishtadvaita* is like the vada whose inside and outside are of the same material. However, Vada is soft inside but its outer surface is

crisp. There is an apparent difference, but it's not real."

If a person is engaged in duality, it means that he has not found a satguru, is Subrahmonyan's view. For a satguru cures you of duality. For a satguru, there is no great person or an ordinary person, rich or the poor, a handsome man or a scarecrow, a learned person or an illiterate. For a satguru, everybody is a Brahman. There is only one Brahman because everybody is a drop in the ocean. "However, forgetting our oceanic nature, we become bubbles in the ocean, and talk of big and small bubbles, blue bubbles, green bubbles, etc. but we are a part of the ocean," said Subrahmonyan. Ramana was a



* K. V. Subrahmonyan

non-dual ocean, he added.

In simple terms, Dr. Ram Mohan said, when somebody has a bubble consciousness, he remains a mere individual. When he has ocean consciousness, he is a Brahman. When a person's bubble consciousness dissolves, he merges with the ocean. So only the level of consciousness differs. "By my own internal efforts, I break my bubble consciousness and I merge with the ocean," Dr. Ram Mohan said.

Dr. Ram Mohan quoted a poem from *Tirumandiram* written in Tamil by Tirumoolar to argue how seekers needed gurus. A ball of cotton did not catch fire even when it was kept in the blazing sun. When a lens, bought for a few rupees, was placed above the cotton and exposed to the sun, it caught fire. "So a guru is like the magnifying lens. Once the guru's rays pass through the lens, your *vasanas* get burnt." (*Vasanas* are latent tendencies, closely bound with *karma*, resulting from a person's actions in his previous life and governing those in this life, unless overcome by *tapas* or by the blessings of a his guru.)

Subrahmonyan concluded, "When you go inward and find yourself, there are no others. The others are a shadow."

* INCREDIBLY WIDELY

READ: 87-year-old K.V. Subrahmonyan asserts that "Bhagavan was the most silent among the gurus and the most non-dual."

- PHOTO:

S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



Our rishis' marga is the heart, not the mind

V. Ganesan is one of the few today who have met Sri Ramana Maharshi and spent time with him. He speaks of the experience of the divine

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

O.

Ganesan is a prolific writer and a gifted raconteur. He has a range of stories to narrate, be it on Vaishnava acharya, Ramanuja, the Advaitin extraordinaire Ramana Maharshi, or one of Ramana's most serious disciples, Arthur Osborne. During an hour he spent with us in his residence at Tiruvannamalai, the 83-year-old Ganesan, grand-nephew of Ramana, repeatedly drove home the point that when it comes to sages, it is the heart that matters and not the brain. For the realm of the heart is surrender. "While the heart's expression is silence, the mind's expression is words, words and

• **PROLIFIC WRITER:** V. Ganesan, grand-nephew of Sri Ramana Maharshi, who argues that when it comes to sages, it is the heart that matters and not the brain.

- PHOTO:

S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



words," he argued. Ganesan was the Editor of *Mountain Path*, a prestigious quarterly magazine published by Sri Ramanasramam.

"Our rishis' marga is the heart, not the mind," Ganesan said. He illustrated this point with a story. Ramanujacharya, with a retinue of his disciples, was heading towards Srirangam from Tirumala because he felt the call of Ranganatha from Srirangam. They had journeyed for a couple of days from Tirumala. When the disciples felt hungry, they opened the vessels containing *laddus*. There were ants all over the *laddus*. Ramanuja was distraught on seeing the ants. He said, "We have no right to bring these ants from the sacred Tirumala where they belong. They are all Tirumalavasis. Let us go back to Tirumala and deposit these ants there!" Ganesan said, "If we were to look at this incident through the prism of our brain/mind, it is lunacy. Our rishis' marga is through the heart."

Sivanandam, a loyal attendant of Ramana Maharshi, asked the latter whether it was true that Bhakti saints such as Mirabai and Tukaram had seen God. Ramana asked him three questions. They were:

- "(1) You are breathing when you are alive. Who is doing the breathing for you?
- (2) You eat when you are hungry. Who does

the digestion for you?

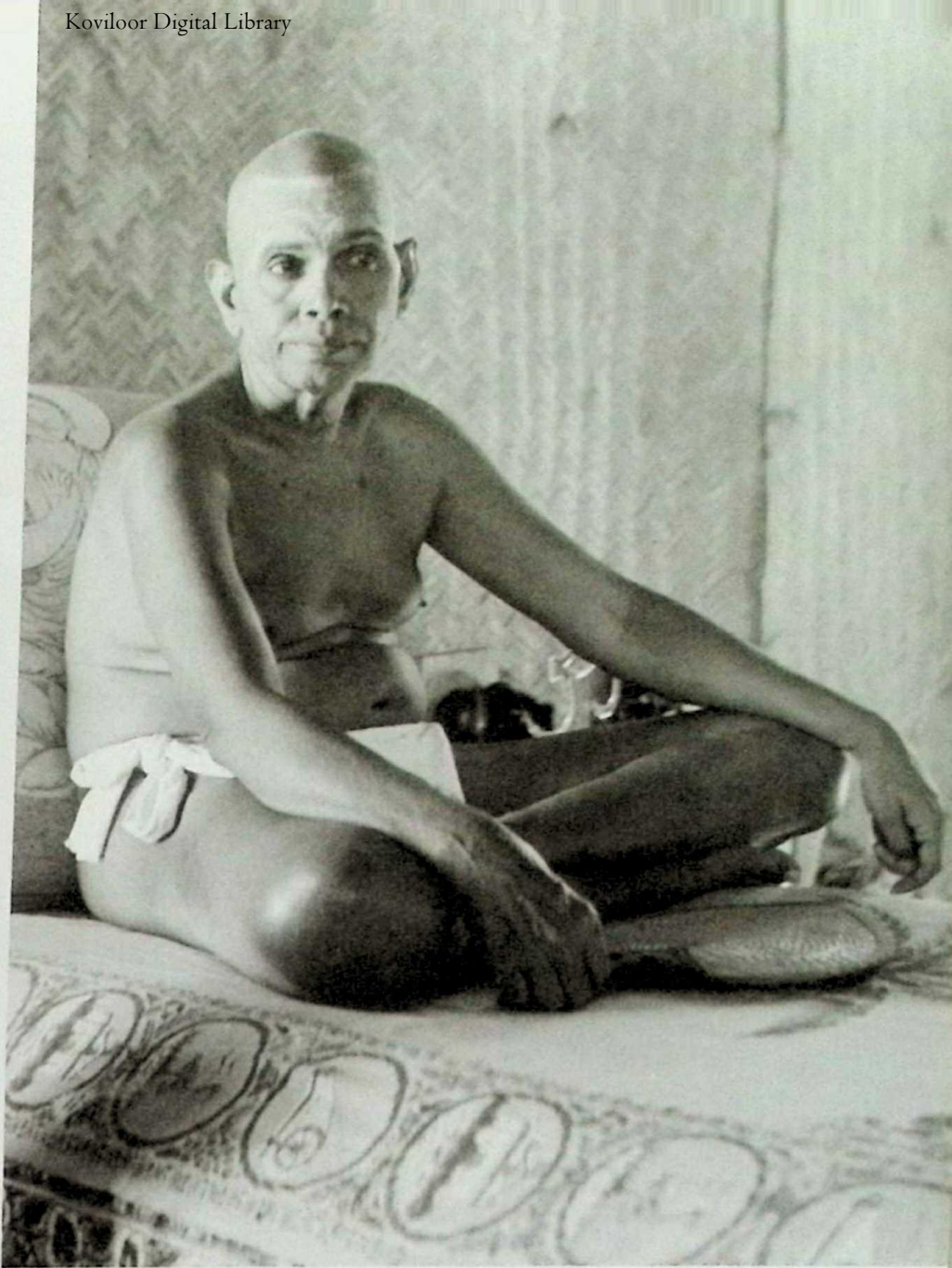
(3) Blood circulates in your body. Who does that circulation?

Is not God behind these three?"

According to Ganesan, Ramana and other sages had always insisted that certain things could only be experienced, not explained. For instance, hunger could only be experienced. It could never be explained. When a devotee asked him, "What is Self?", Ramana's reply again was, "Self can only be experienced, not explained."

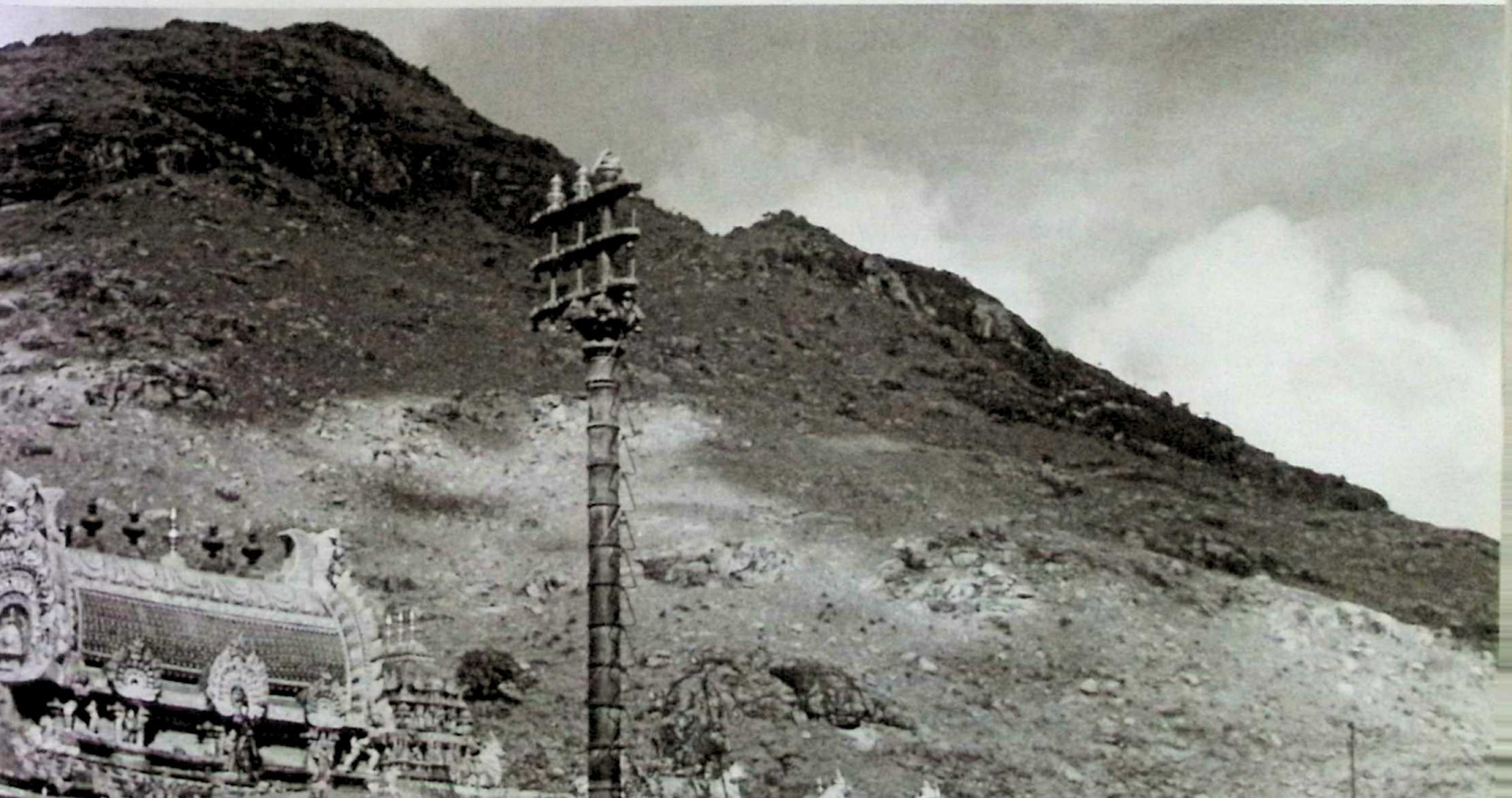
Ganesan is one of the few people alive today who have met Ramana many times and stayed with him. The others are his elder brother V.S. Ramanan, president, Sri Ramanasramam and his younger brother, V. Subramanian, administrator of the ashram. The three brothers have stayed with Ramana in the ashram. They were studying in school then. They are the grandsons of Ramana's younger brother, Nagasundaram alias Swami Niranjanananda, who was the *sarvadhikari* of the ashram when Ramana was alive. Niranjanananda's son is T.N. Venkataraman and his sons are Ramanan, Ganesan and Subramanian.

The books written by Ganesan on the Maharshi include *Ramana Periya Puranam* (Inner Journey of 75 Old Devotees), *Meetings with Sages and Saints*, *Moments Remembered* (Reminiscences of Bhagavan Ramana), *Direct Teaching of Bhagavan Ramana* and *Purushottama Ramana*.



■ PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM

★ (Below): The *vimana* over the sanctum of one of the shrines, the *dwajasthambam* and the Arunachala hill in the background. - PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM





In search of what is True

David Godman, a long-time devotee of Ramana Maharshi, speaks of what the teachings of Bhagavan mean to those who come seeking Him

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪



David Godman knows how to speak and write elegantly. When he talks about Sri Ramana Maharshi, words flow but they are precise and to the point. Today, he is one of the acknowledged authorities on Ramana's life and teachings. Godman's six-page introduction to the book titled *Be As You are, The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* gives us a glimpse of his scholarship on the life and teachings of Ramana. Godman edited this book, which was published by Penguin. The other titles written or edited by him include *The Power of the Presence* (in three volumes), *No Mind - I am the Self, Living by the Words of Bhagavan, Nothing Ever Happened* (three volumes), *Sri Ramana Darsanam, Ramana Puranam, Annamalai Swami, Final Talks, Papaji Interviews* and so on.

From 1978 to 1985, Godman was the librarian in the library on the ashram

• David Godman, an acknowledged authority on Sri Ramana Maharshi and his teachings.

• PHOTO:

S. R. RAGHUNATHAN

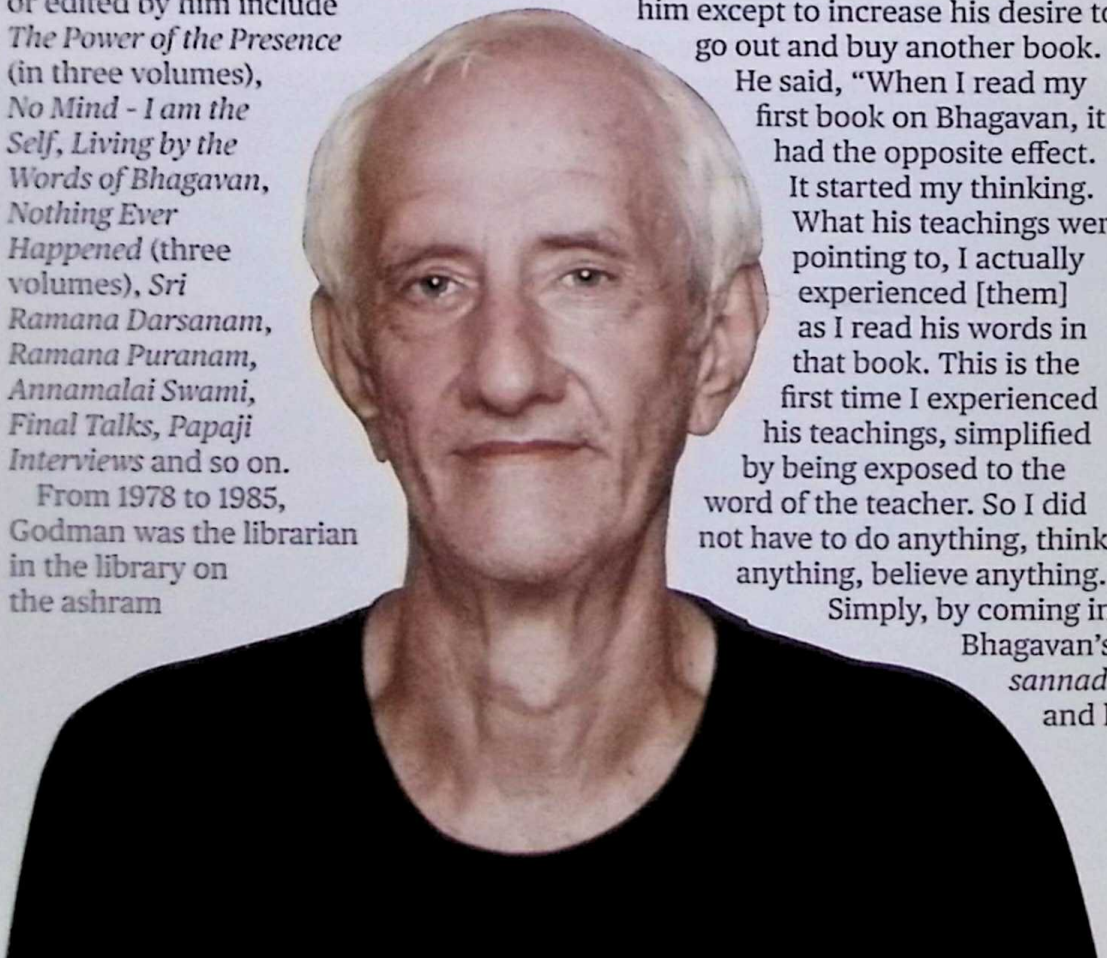
premises. He was later the Editor of *Mountain Path*, a scholarly, quarterly journal published by Sri Ramanasramam. He has produced many films on Ramana, his teachings and his devotees.

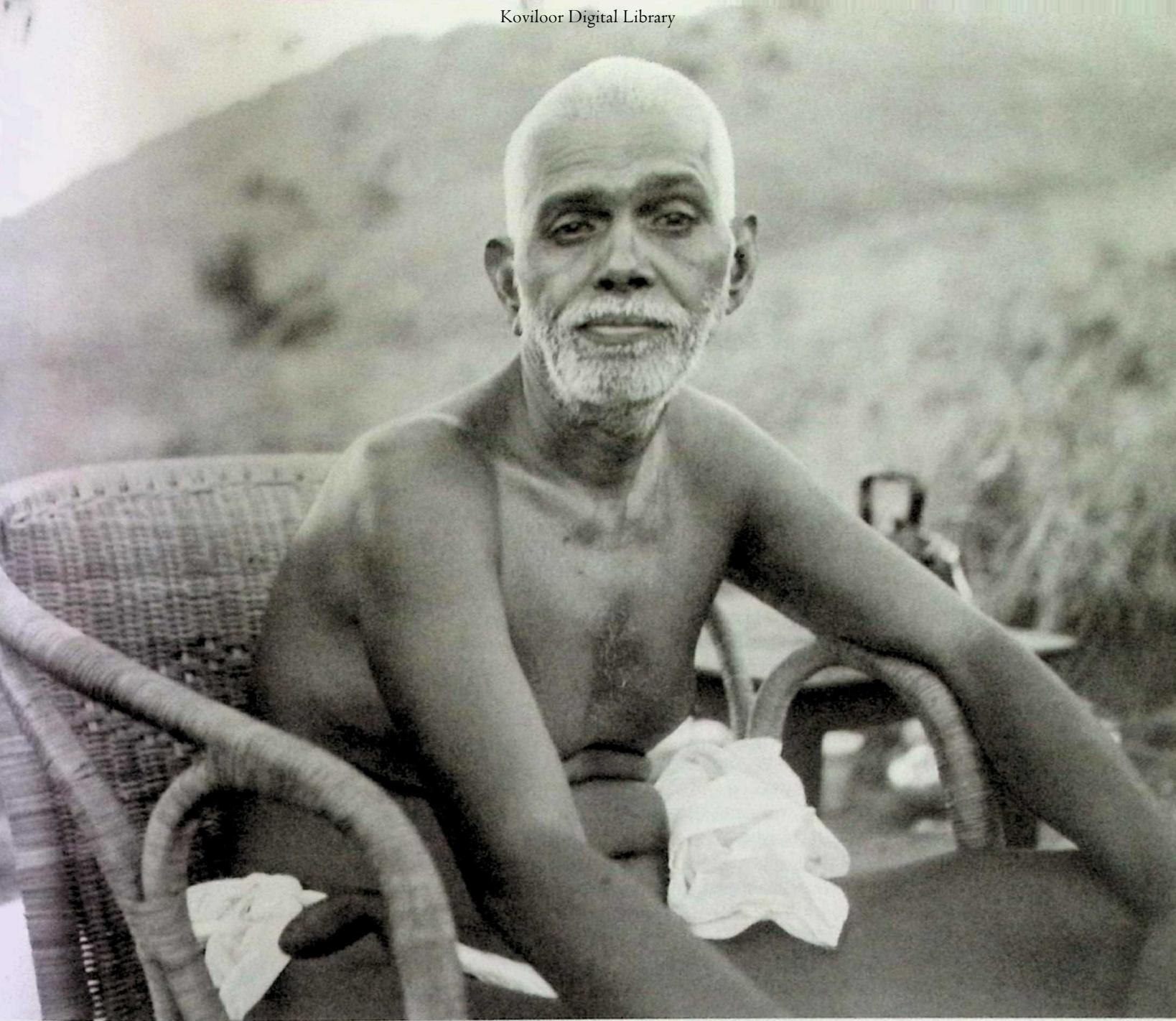
This writer met 66-year-old Godman for a short conversation on October 5, 2019 at the Sri Ramanasramam premises, Tiruvannamalai. Godman said he first read a book on Ramana in the Oxford University bookshop in 1974. Although he was then reading a lot of books on spiritual and religious matters, he said none of them did anything to him except to increase his desire to go out and buy another book.

He said, "When I read my first book on Bhagavan, it had the opposite effect.

It started my thinking. What his teachings were pointing to, I actually experienced [them] as I read his words in that book. This is the first time I experienced his teachings, simplified by being exposed to the word of the teacher. So I did not have to do anything, think anything, believe anything.

Simply, by coming into Bhagavan's sannadhi and his





■ PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM

presence through his words on the pages, put me in the state he was wanting me to be in through all his spoken teachings.”

After that, Godman obtained as much information as he could on Ramana, but little was available to him in the West in 1974, he said. He had a strong desire to find out more about Bhagavan. So he arrived at the Ramanasramam in 1976, intending to stay there for a few weeks. “I immediately felt I belonged here. I liked it so much that I decided to stay here. I have been here more or less ever since,” he said.

Asked about the inscription titled “Death Experience of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi” on a wall in the Matrubhuteswara temple in the ashram premises, Godman suggested to this writer that he should go into all the other occasions when Ramana talked about the experience. Godman said,

“... Bhagavan himself wrote in one of his poems - the only occasion he wrote about that particular experience - he said, “Enquiring within, who is the one who sees, I saw that seer disappear, leaving that which is always there...” So Bhagavan framed his experience in terms of being a consequence, asking himself the question, “Who is the one who sees the objects?” So for him, the experience was the complete disappearance of the dichotomy between an internal seer and an external world, which is observed...”

Asked whether people came to Ramana in search of solace in his teachings, Godman said “solace” was not the right word to be used. Many of the people, who came to the ashram, had a hunger for transcendence. They were not looking for solace. “They have a strong inner desire to find out what is true, what is real and what is permanent, and to become one with it,” Godman said.



The basis of Truth is 'I am'

A meeting with the devout V. Dwaraknath Reddy, who believes that Ramana helped make Goodhood achievable for all...

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

A

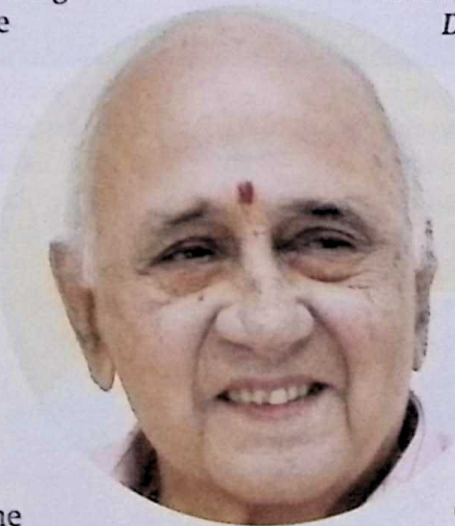
mong the devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi today, V. Dwaraknath Reddy stands out for his sincerity in understanding Ramana's teachings and abiding by them. His devotion to Ramana is so complete that he has chosen to live a couple of hundred metres away from Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, for more than 30 years now despite his having a big bungalow on a five-acre garden near Chittoor town in Andhra Pradesh. "This is my home and Ramana is my life," he said with passion when we met him in his residence at Tiruvannamalai on October 5, 2019. His sharp memory, clear narration and enunciation belied his age of 95 years as he recalled details of his life including how he was attracted to the Maharshi and Swamy Chinmayananda.

Industrialist Dwaraknath Reddy, who founded the Nutrine Confectionery Company along with his father, is given to munificence. The Ramanarpanam Trust which he founded, has already spent Rs.40 crores in educating more than 2,000 boys and girls from slums, taking care of the families where the

husbands had deserted their wives or were not looking after their children. Ramanarpanam Trust has provided them with houses too. He said, "My trust has donated money to the poorest of the poor. We have built houses for 2,000 families. I have spent more than Rs.40 crores of my personal money which I put in the trust," he said. He has written several books including *Diving Deep into Ramana Maharshi's Teachings*, *Death Was Never Born*, *Life Never Died*, *Can God Improve my Balance Sheet*, *The Physics of Karma*, *A Requiem to Time*, etc.

On Ramana, Dwaraknath Reddy asserted, "I have no doubt whatsoever that Ramana was a realised soul. Ramana's Self-realisation was extraordinary. 'I am' is the basis of the whole Truth." From the 1960s, he started reading a lot of

Ramana's teachings. He said, "I was very sincere in that. My only credit was my earnestness in the subject. I stayed with Bhagavan's words and teachings, reading what he wrote, going through the books written on him, thinking about them and still working in my factory. Life is nothing but turning God-ward. What life did to me did not matter for any purpose. God became



▪ "RAMANA IS MY LIFE": 95-year old V. Dwaraknath Reddy, industrialist, asserts that he has "no doubt whatsoever that Ramana is a realised soul."

~ PHOTO:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

man and man again became God. This sounds fantastic. But the proof of this is in persons such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj. I have no doubt whatsoever that Ramana was a realised soul."

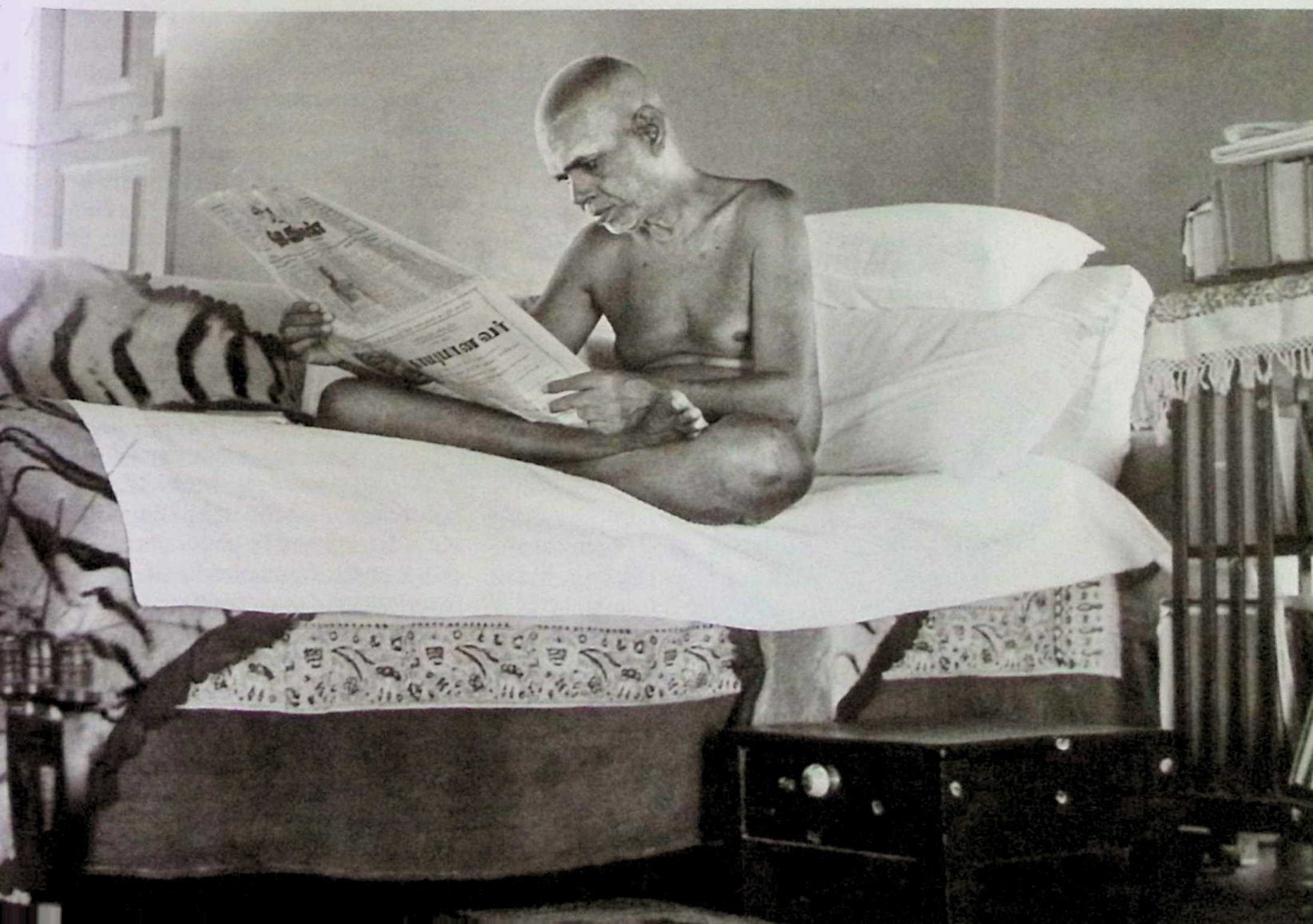
When Dwaraknath Reddy was 35-years-old in 1959, personal tragedies struck him. His elder brother, 37 years old then, died of cerebral haemorrhage. His younger brother died a few years later. His father too passed away. So he had to bring up ten children, three of his, and seven of his brothers'. At that time, Swamy Chinmayananda had come down from the Himalayas. Dwaraknath Reddy listened to Chinmayananda's discourses in Madras, now called Chennai, and got some idea that there was a reality to the word "God". He said, "I felt Godhood was real, and it was achievable and attainable. We are all made of God-material but we have corrupted ourselves with our minds. Reality is consciousness..." Chinmayananda assessed that

Dwaraknath Reddy was a genuine seeker and a sincere devotee. So he appointed him as one of six all-India trustees of his organisation.

Dwaraknath Reddy said that he was always aware of Ramana's greatness and knew that Bhagavan was God. He said: "I just have the feeling that Bhagavan is God. 'I am' is the Truth. 'I am' is common to everybody. *Sat Chit Anand* is the spiritual condensation of the description they have found for God. *Sat* is being 'I'. *Chit* is the mind. There is *Ananda*. The essence to understand it is the 'I am'-ness. So I have a mind from which I can experience *ananda* or joy." He said people did not realise that they were *sat chit ananda purushas* where *ananda* was their instinct and nature. But they were dependent on objects outside them for *ananda*. "Duality comes in then and *Advaita* disappears. But the Truth is 'I' and 'I' alone because here is nothing but consciousness. "I am". Full stop. Even 'I am Brahman' is an extension. Who is Brahman? I do not know," Dwaraknath Reddy said.

★ **AN AVID READER:**
Sri Ramana Maharshi was a keen reader of newspapers and kept himself informed of national and international developments.

- PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM





From all walks of life

Devotees at Sri Ramanasramam hail from around the globe, from all walks of life

▪ T. S. S. ▪

A

loya is from Novosibirsk, the capital of Siberia, in the Russian Federation.

"What attracted you to Sri Ramana Maharshi?" this writer asked her on the premises of Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai. "Lord Siva invited me here," she said. "I am an Advaitin."

"So you believe that the *Jeevatma* and the *Paramatma* are one. You believe in non-duality," this writer suggested. Aloya waved him away with an imperious flourish of her hand, implying, "You will not understand all that." The next question was: "Which part of Russia are you from?" She replied, "Novosibirsk."

When this writer told her that he was in Novosibirsk in November 2017 and had visited the Nuclear Chemical Concentrates Plant (NCCP) there, which supplies slightly enriched uranium fuel bundles to the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Station in Tamil Nadu, she was delighted. However, she would not reveal her full name and walked away abruptly.

To use a cliché, the Ramanasramam

is a global village. It attracts seekers from everywhere - Russia, the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Japan, Korea, Germany and Iraq, and what more, every part of India. The ashram continues to be the same cosmopolitan, spiritual centre that it was when Sri Ramana Maharshi was alive, attracting devotees and disciples from across the globe. Ramana was the lodestar who attracted Parsi and Muslim seekers too.

Strangely, several foreigners visiting the ashram, did not want to be interviewed. A Japanese couple walked away, saying, "We don't have time." A young man from Canada, after he did some initial talking, developed cold feet and declined to say anything more.

However, 'Chandi Devi', a former teacher of English from California, USA, was a different kettle of



• Chandi Devi

fish. Not only is she an Advaitin and a dedicated devotee of Ramana, but a determined fighter for ecological causes in Tiruvannamalai. These issues include preservation of ponds (*kulam*) and holy tanks on the *girivalam* route, battling the officials cutting down trees on the *girivalam* path and fighting cement-concrete slabs being laid around trees, which suffocate the trees and lead to their death and so

on. Chandi Devi came to India first in 1992 but moved permanently into Tiruvannamalai from 1999 onwards.

She said, "This Advaita and the purity of Bhagavan have been my attraction. That is my heart." Bhagavan was non-dual, she emphasised. Earlier, when she was asked what attracted her to Ramana, she said: "My guru, Papaji in Lucknow, was one of Bhagavan's spiritual sons. I was attracted to Papaji. He always had a picture of Bhagavan everywhere [in his home]. Before Papaji left his form in 1997, he would always tell people: "If you want to go anywhere in India, go to Sri Ramanasramam.""

Papaji's original name was H.W.L. Poonja. He was from Punjab but his family settled down in Lucknow after the Partition in 1947.

"After Papaji merged with his Master in 1997," Chandi Devi relocated to Tiruvannamalai in 1999. "Bhagavan grabbed my heart," she said. "I am now with Bhagavan. Arunachala also grabbed me. When I travel anywhere now, I cannot stay there for more than two months because Arunachala calls me back." She asserted: "I started my spiritual search 50 years ago. The search is finished."

It was a different trip for Suresh Kailaash, an agnostic, who was working in an advertisement agency in Mumbai. At that time, he read a book on Ramana's teachings. Later, he was transferred to Chennai. After a few years, he travelled to Ramanasramam. "The moment I came into the ashram and entered the *samadhi* hall of Bhagavan, I knew I was home. There was no doubt I was home." He felt a "tremendous sense of relief and lightness," he said. Things "got arranged in a beautiful way" for him. He bought a piece of land, about five kilometres from the ashram and built a house there.

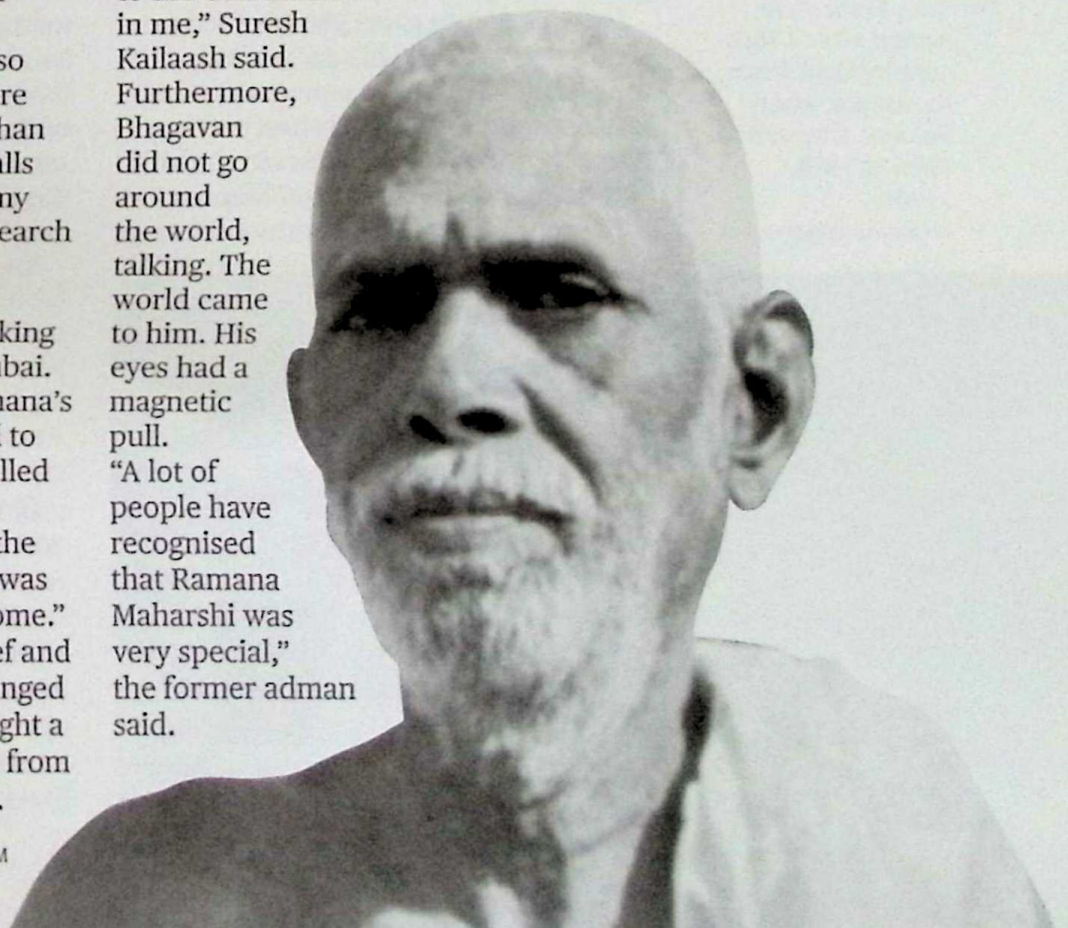
He alternates between his homes in Chennai and Tiruvannamalai now. "It is simply his grace. It is very palpable even now." Bhagavan's teaching and grace has done wonders to him, he emphasised.

Asked what part of Ramana's teachings attracted him the most, Suresh Kailaash replied that Ramana's teachings did not ask him to believe in God. He said: "The teachings ask me to investigate the feeling of 'I'... Everybody has an 'I'. Just investigate it. It is so practical and straightforward. It is so honest. No hidden agenda." It appealed to the agnostic in him.

Besides, what

attracted him to Ramana was the "exemplary, simple life" that the latter led. Ramana led an ecologically sound life, says Suresh Kailaash. He had a way with animals. He practised equality in the ashram. "That appealed to the Communist in me," Suresh Kailaash said. Furthermore, Bhagavan did not go around the world, talking. The world came to him. His eyes had a magnetic pull. "A lot of people have recognised that Ramana Maharshi was very special," the former adman said.

• Suresh Kailash, an agnostic-turned-devotee of Sri Ramana Maharshi



WHO AM I ?



Preserving a rich cultural and spiritual heritage

A look at the history and biodiversity of the Arunachala hill

• DR. T. SATYAMURTHY •

T

he Tiruvannamalai hill, known as Arunachala, represents one of the sacred sites in the subcontinent that stands for both the tangible and intangible heritage of our past. Vedic passages are quoted for the significance of the Tiruvannamalai hill being the place of enlightenment as personified by the five rudimentary elements - Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Ether. There are as many as 52 ancient Indian texts in Sanskrit and Tamil that herald this place as a highly spiritual centre.

Early literature gives prominence to the Tiruvannamalai hill rather than to the temple. Tirugnanasambandar, the Saivaite saint of the 6th century CE, portrays the hill itself as Siva in the holy text that he composed, the *Thevaram*. He describes vividly the flora and fauna

in the thick forests where tribals were engaged in the trade of native products. It is significant that the recording of the Saivaite saint predates the earliest archaeological evidences available here. However, investigations by geologists and structural mapping with inputs from details on igneous (dyke activity), record that a metamorphic event took place around 2,550 million years ago.

In spite of the fact that the hill was personified and worshipped during the Pallava period, we have the earliest lithic record of the Aditya Chola period datable to 885 CE. Following his rule, many Chola kings and Pandya rulers, Sambuvarayars and Vijayanagara kings have contributed to the development of the temple and its surroundings. The services of the Hoysala king, Balla III of the 13th century CE, is found recoded in inscriptions here.

The biodiversity of the hill is so fabulous that more than 40 rare herbs have been identified on its slopes. Its serene environs have attracted spiritual aspirants over hundreds of years. Among them, Sri Ramana Maharshi stands unique.

Over the centuries, many saints and sages have been drawn to Arunachala. In the fifteenth century, Guru Namasivaya and Virupaksha Deva came from Karnataka and settled on Arunachala. Saint Namasivaya lived in one of Arunachala caves which is still known by his name. Virupaksha Deva lived in an "Om"-shaped cave higher up

• A STAY OF 17 YEARS: Virupaksha cave, named after a 16th-century saint from Karnataka, where Ramana stayed from 1899 to 1916.

- PHOTO:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM





on the hill, and this cave too still bears his name.

In Tiruvannamalai, Sri Ramana Maharshi spent the first few weeks in the Arunachaleswara temple in the underground vault of the Patalesvara shrine, so that he would remain undisturbed. Later, for a short time, he stayed in many natural caverns like the Guru Namasivaya cave and then reached the Virupaksha cave. He lived here for 17 years, searching the inner self: "Who am I?"

Located on the south-east slope of Arunachala hill, the Virupaksha cave was Sri Ramana Maharshi's choice for his penance. He lived here from 1899 to 1916. In recent times, a shrine has been constructed to protect the Virupaksha cave, which allows the devotee to enter and partake of the splendid vibrations within.

Sri Ramana Maharshi emphasised Self-realisation through meditation for all. But he also showed an easy way for spiritual upliftment through the circumambulation of the hill, as it is considered to be the true representation of Lord Siva. He himself performed this *pradakshina* (a 14 km walk) frequently. Going around the hill is a tradition in Tiruvannamalai for many hundreds of years, as we have epigraphical references to show that the present pathway of such circumambulation was formally laid during the 13th CE,

by Vikrama Pandya, who was the ruler in this part of the country during that time. The milestone erected by the king mentions the passage as "Sri Vikrama Pandya Veedhi (Street)". It was classified into many divisions for easy maintenance.

In 1996, devotees of the Maharshi made an appeal to the Government of India to protect and preserve the hill and the pathway on which the Bhagavan had walked, as a national monument as part of the commemoration of the centenary of the arrival of Ramana Maharshi to Tiruvannamalai. Since the number of devotees was increasing every year and many modern religious and commercial buildings were built on both sides of the hill, it was felt that the visual impact of the hill would be lost in due course. The appeal was duly considered and the then Cabinet Secretary inspected the site. Three options were sent to the Ministry of Culture through the Archaeological Survey of India, Chennai circle.

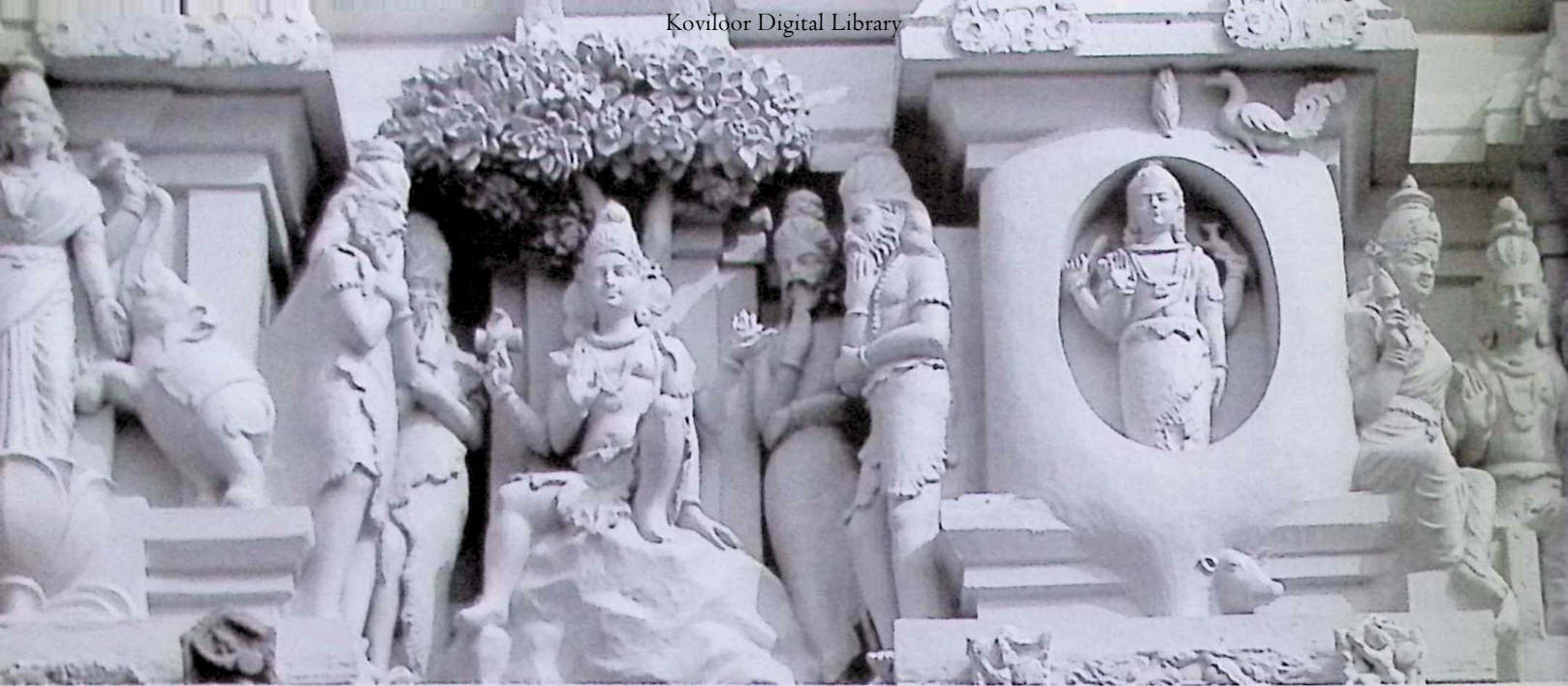
1. Protection of the entire pathway of *pradakshinapatha* as national monument.

The feasibility was quite problematic as the 14 km stretch has to remain without any modern activities as per archaeological law. Any building activities within 100m are prohibited and 200m further to this are declared as regulated area.

2. Protection of the *ashta linga*

• The Chakra Teertha kulam (pond) on the opposite side of the *rajagopuram* and the sacred Arunachala hill in the background.

- PHOTO:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



• (From left)
Stucco figurines
of Gajalakshmi,
Dakshinamurti and
the Lingodhbhava on
one of the *gopuras* of
the Arunachaleswarar
temple.

— PHOTO: © PHILLIP LUCAS

shrines of the *ashta dikpalakas* located
in the eight cardinal directions as
monuments of national importance as
per Archaeological Act 1958.

This would stop any modern building
activities all around. By that time,
the temples of the Chola period were
completely renovated with modern
materials and the ancient grandeur was
completely lost.

3. The protection of the natural
caverns where the great seers including
Ramana Maharshi stayed and attained
Enlightenment.

Skandasramam and the Virupaksha
caves were the places where Ramana
Maharshi stayed and spent most of his
life time till 1922 CE, when he moved to
the present Ramanasramam.

Considering the immediate viability,
the third option was preferred
for immediate implementation.

Construction activities included
the building of the modern District
Collector's office that was underway,
which if completed, would mar the
visual impact of the hill. Such sites were
very near the pathway leading to the
caves.

Consequently, “two natural caverns
known as Skandasramam and
Virupaksha Guhai with passage leading
from Ramanasramam (as shown in the
site plan)” were declared as monuments
of national importance through a
notification on 22nd August 1997. The
area notified happens to be under the
ownership of the Forest Department
and hence the operation to save the hill
became fully successful.

In this context, it is appropriate to
record that the Government of Tamil
Nadu dismantled the Collectorate
building that was partially constructed
up to the plinth.

Arunachala hill and the natural
environment could thus be saved from
further modern building activities to a
major extent till date.

*Dr. T. Satyamurthy was Superintending
Archaeologist, ASI, Chennai Circles.
He was also Director, Kerala State
Department of Archaeology.*



Sketch: ASI, Chennai

Prepared by: R. Vinayagam, Surveyor, ASI

• THE EASTERN
GOPURA: Soaring
into the sky.

- PHOTO:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN





True devotion & selfless service

Arthur Osborne found his calling at the feet of Sri Ramana Maharshi. His story is that of a true devotee who finally found the light

▪ V. GANESAN ▪

Arthur Osborne came to Ramana Maharshi in 1945. He stayed with the master for only five years, with brief gaps. But they were years packed with his devotion and the Master's grace. From the beginning, Bhagavan, in his own mysterious, mystical, but simple and natural way, drew Arthur Osborne to himself, for the sole purpose of spreading his direct teaching. It was my good fortune to work closely with Osborne for six years. What a lot did I learn from him!

Arthur Osborne ably shouldered the responsibility of upholding the direct teaching of Bhagavan through

his life and his brilliant writing. He had the rare combination of intellectual clarity, intuition and poetical ability to articulate his experiences. Those who read Osborne's books, especially *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge*, will know what a lucid writer he was and how he could find effortless expression where others would fumble or be at a loss for words. Arthur Osborne's devotion to Bhagavan was complete and he gave to Bhagavan his whole life together with his many and varied talents. All these he gave without any reserve and without any thought of himself.

Who was Arthur Osborne? He was born in London in 1906. His father was a school headmaster and his mother was a simple, pious lady interested in poetry and gardening. Osborne inherited these two traits from his mother. He wanted to be a gardener, a farmer, all his life. But his father put him in Oxford and he came out brilliantly with ten gold medals.

At a particular stage, he came across the writings of the French philosopher Rene Guenon and he was thrilled because Rene Guenon's teaching was, "Being is one." He immediately felt that this teaching was the truth. His restlessness and discontent over the futility of worldly living dropped off with the realisation that life has, after all, a meaning.

He got a job in the University of Bangkok in Thailand and took his wife

* Arthur Osborne and his wife, Lucia Osborne.

~ COURTESY:

SRI RAMANASRAMAM

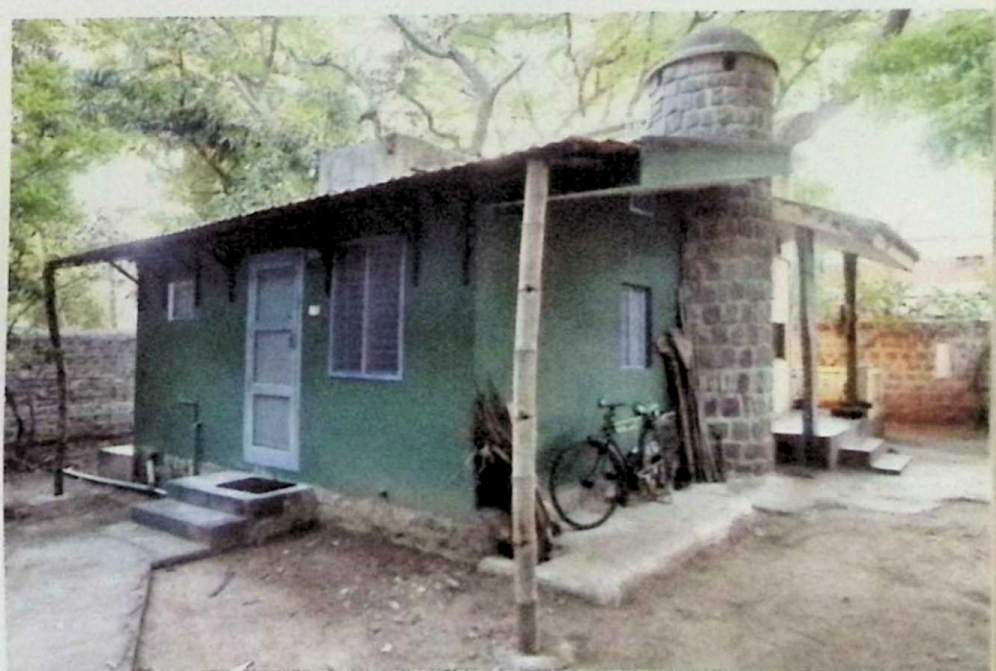


and three children there. Wherever he went, he was always in contact with members of Rene Guenon's group. One of the members, David McIver, sent them a photograph of Ramana Maharshi and two of Bhagavan's books. He also cautioned them that Ramana Maharshi was not a guru as he did not give initiations or accept anyone as a disciple. But Arthur and Lucia Osborne were captivated by the picture of Bhagavan and desired to go to India and meet Ramana Maharshi.

Being a very hot summer, they first went to Kashmir where they were met by David McIver who also owned a cottage opposite to Ramanasramam. After spending a few weeks, Osborne had to go to Bangkok. Fortunately, David invited Mrs. Osborne and the three children and took them to Tiruvannamalai. When Osborne went to Bangkok, the Second World War broke out and the Japanese arrested him and put him in jail. For three and a half years he was in jail. Arthur Osborne's only solace was Bhagavan's picture and the two books. When the Japanese came to arrest him from the university campus, some urge prompted him to take these three things. While in the prison camp, he created and tended to a very nice garden. His personality, and his talks there, drew many people to him. One among them was Louis Hurst, who came to Bhagavan after the Second World War.

Far away in Tiruvannamalai, Mrs. Osborne had by then already got Bhagavan's *darshan*. The moment she saw Bhagavan's eyes - Bhagavan gave her a pointed look - she felt absolutely transformed. Bhagavan took special care of Mrs. Osborne and the children.

Osborne told me that when he was in the prison, prominent British prisoners were sometimes taken away and executed. When the special force came to take Osborne, everyone was sure that he was going to be shot. Osborne told me, "The last thing I looked at was Bhagavan's picture and the two books. When I was taken in front of the firing squad, I closed my eyes. I did not pray to Bhagavan but Bhagavan's picture came to my mind and for some unknown reason they released me and put me in a concentration camp."



★ RESIDENCE NAMED AFTER RAMANA AND HILL (Top) The residence of Osborne, called Ramanagiri, built on a lane opposite to the ashram; (Middle) The Osbornes' residence; and (Bottom) An old dwelling unit inside the Osbornes' residence.

• PHOTOS: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN



* The tombstones of Lucia Osborne and Arthur Osborne in the compound of their residence, opposite to the ashram, in Tiruvannamalai.

* PHOTO:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

While he was suffering, his children back in Tiruvannamalai went on praying to Bhagavan for their father's safe return. Bhagavan never gave an answer until the war ended. The day when Osborne was released along with the first batch of forty prisoners, his son Adam's prayers were answered by Bhagavan: "Yes, Adam's father is coming back."

When Osborne came to Arunachala, he was in a debilitated mental state because of the torture in the concentration camp. Intellectuals were tortured to brainwash them. The only person he could recognise in his poor mental condition was his wife. She came crying to Bhagavan. Bhagavan told her, "Please bring Osborne here morning and evening and make him sit where I can see him." This happened till he became completely all right and continued even afterwards. Osborne told me, "Bhagavan saw to it that I sat where he could see me. One day, when two or three people came and sat between me and Bhagavan, he even asked those people to sit elsewhere so that he could see me, which was very, very unusual for him."

However, Bhagavan did not reveal himself to Osborne on the very first day. Some days later, on a festive occasion, Bhagavan concentrated his attention on Osborne and the change came with all its immensity. This is how Osborne describes it: "Bhagavan sat up facing me and his luminous eyes pierced into me, penetrating intimately with an intensity which I cannot describe. Then arose from within, a quietness, a depth of peace and an indescribable lightness and happiness." This is what is written in the book.

He was staying with Bhagavan when the British Government announced

that all the released British prisoners of war in India would be accommodated in Britain with all comforts. The British High Commission sent letter after letter to the Osbornes about this. They did not even show these letters to Bhagavan to ask him his opinion. They were certain that they did not want to leave Bhagavan and go anywhere else. When the last ship was to leave India for Britain, the British High Commissioner sent a telegram to alert them. Mrs. Osborne told me that she did not even feel like taking this telegram to Bhagavan because it was already confirmed for them that Bhagavan was their sole refuge and that there was no other worldly life than staying with Bhagavan.

The fateful day when Bhagavan left his body, Osborne was there. It did not fill him with sorrow. Instead, it only made him plunge within. He felt Bhagavan's grace more abundantly and his support more powerfully. Some days after Bhagavan's *mahanivana*, Bhagavan appeared to him in his dream. In the dream, Osborne was in the Old Hall and Bhagavan asked him to come near the couch. Osborne went and knelt before Bhagavan and Bhagavan put his hands on Osborne's head in blessing. When Bhagavan put his hand on his head, he had a feeling that Bhagavan was asking him to write about his direct teaching. He then wrote seven articles. They were brought out later as a book titled *Ramana Arunachala*. Every one of us, every seeker should read this book. That was the beginning. Soon, a cascade of books started coming from Osborne: *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge*, *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, *The Teachings of the Maharshi in His Own Words*, *The Incredible Sai Baba*, *Rhythm of History*, *Buddhism and Christianity in the Light of Hinduism*, *Gautama the Buddha*, *The Question of Progress* and a few more.

This is how the *Mountain Path* started. Osborne and I became very close while collaborating on it. He worked very hard to collect articles and he himself wrote many of them. And my efforts to raise funds for the ashram, by collecting advertisement, were crowned with success.

The closeness between Osborne and me was remarkable and we continued with collaborating on the Mountain Path successfully. It was fast becoming a reputed spiritual journal and it brought erudite seekers like Douglas Harding, Robert Linssen, Joel Goldsmith, Wei Wu Wei, Thomas Merton and many reputed writers from all over the world to be in touch with Ramanasramam and in contact with Bhagavan's teaching. Osborne's remarkable ability in presenting Bhagavan's teaching of Self-enquiry is, clearly seen in his brilliant editorials and the numerous articles he wrote under his various pseudonyms - Sagittarius, Abdullah Kutbuddin, Sebastian Qubbins, Boddhicitta, Saidas and A. Rao. He contributed articles on Christianity, Buddhism and Islam in each issue of the journal.

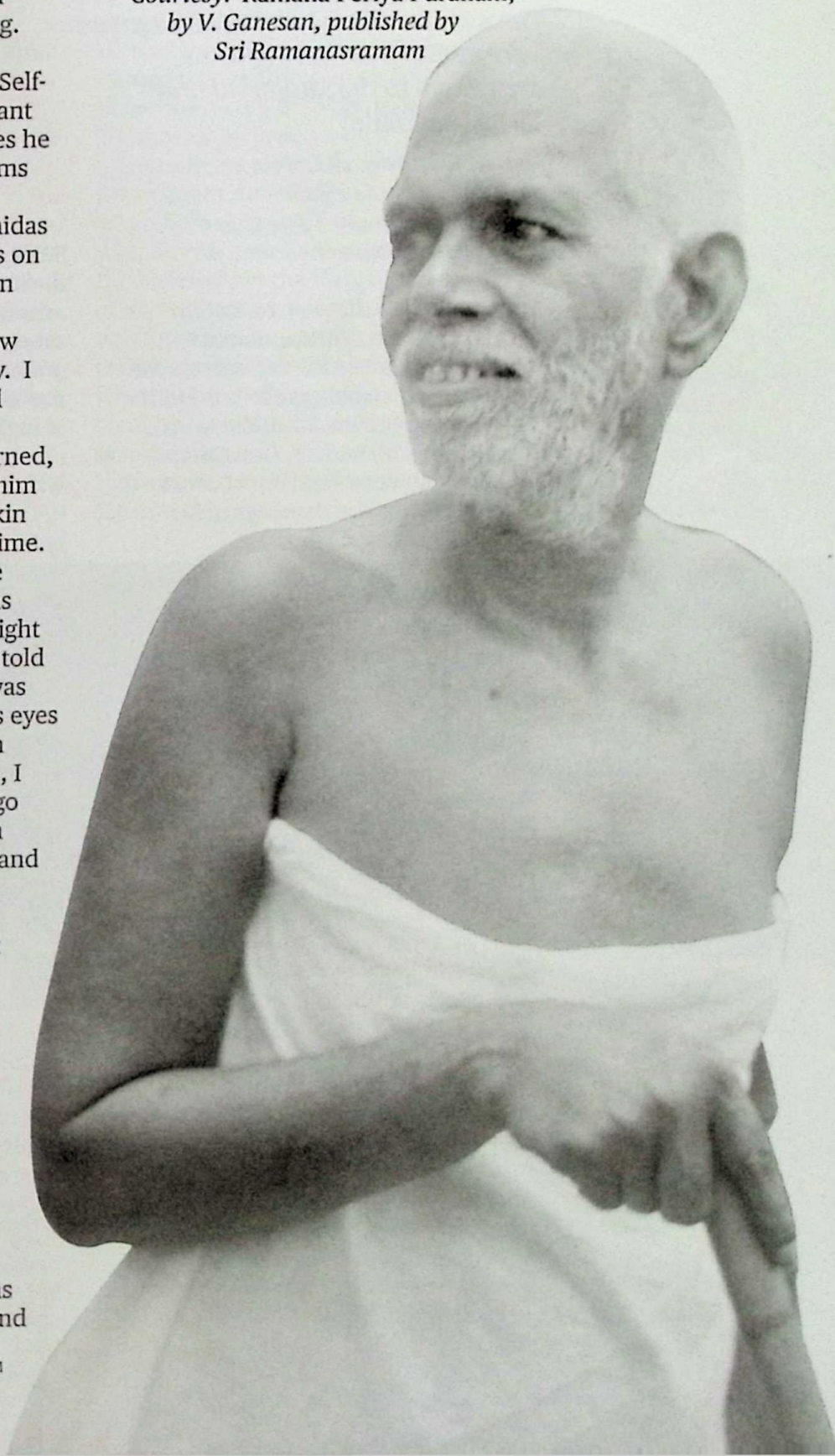
In 1968, I was introduced to a new dimension of Osborne's spirituality. I was going to Osborne's house at all times of the day. However, for one week I had to be away. After I returned, when I went to his house, I found him stretched on his bed, reduced to skin and bones - all in just one week's time. Then, I noticed the change and the transformation in his face and I was wonderstruck. It glowed with a bright and beautiful aura. My inner voice told me, "Osborne has realised." This was his final realisation. He opened his eyes and gave me a warm welcome with a lustrous look. He said, "Ganesan, I am saved. The *Mountain Path* will go on, do not worry." I sat next to him overwhelmed with joy. I held his hand and sat gazing at his radiant face.

When Osborne was in Bangalore and his end was near, he could not speak at all. As a ritual farewell, Mrs. Osborne went around the prostrate body of her husband. Suddenly, she heard Osborne's voice saying clearly, "Thank you." Osborne's body was brought to Tiruvannamalai and interred in his house. I was there all the time and I was heartbroken. The July 1970 issue was the first issue that I brought out without Osborne. He would place every issue that was brought out in Bhagavan's shrine and

only then would he himself go through it, or give it to me or others. When I placed the July 1970 issue in front of Bhagavan's shrine I was weeping.

In following Bhagavan's path of enquiry, Osborne combined with it true devotion and selfless service - *jnana* went hand in hand with *bhakti* and *nishkamya karma*.

Courtesy: Ramana Periya Puranam,
by V. Ganesan, published by
Sri Ramanasramam





They came, and stayed on

The western disciples of the Bhagavan were many. Discovering what drew them to the Maharshi and Tiruvannamalai

▪ T. S. SUBRAMANIAN ▪

A

As one steps into the premises of Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, what strikes him or her the most is the number of foreigners present there. They come from England, the U.S., Russia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea and so on. Most of them are serious devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi, who have immersed themselves in his teachings and have engaged in Self-enquiry. They can be seen meditating in front of the *samadhis* of Ramana and his mother; in the Meditation Hall; the Virupaksha cave; and the Skandasramam. There is no doubt that 70 years after Ramana attained *mahanirvana* on April 14, 1950, he continues to attract thousands of seekers from the west and the number only keeps increasing. The early devotees of Ramana from the west included F.H. Humphreys, Paul Brunton, Major A.W. Chadwick, Maurice Frydman, Eleanor Pauline Noye, S.S. Cohen, Grant Duff, and of course, the erudite Arthur Osborne. The novelist,

Somerset Maugham, was neither a devotee nor a disciple. He came to the ashram in March 1939. He and Ramana sat opposite to each other for about 30 minutes in Chadwick's cottage in the ashram premises. But Ramana and Maugham never exchanged a word directly. In fact, Major Chadwick has written derisively about Maugham in his book titled, *A Sadhu's Reminiscences of Ramana Maharshi*, published by Sri Ramanasramam



• Major A.W. Chadwick
alias Sadhu Arunachala

Chadwick was such a committed disciple of Ramana that he called himself Sadhu Arunachala. He came to the ashram in 1935 from the U.K. and never went back to his country. He attained Self-realisation. He stayed in the ashram permanently till his death in April 1962.

When V. Ganesan, a grand-nephew of the Maharshi who has also authored many books on him, asked Major Chadwick why westerners were drawn to Bhagavan's teachings, Chadwick's reply was significant. He said: "Bhagavan's message is certainly much appreciated in the west. His purely rational arguments and lack of sentiment in his teachings have a great appeal. He never preached or laid down the law. Instead, he always concentrated on turning the

seeker back into himself and pointing out to him that it was entirely up to him, since the guru could only indicate the way and guide him. For, no one can give Self-realisation to another.” (From *Ramana Periya Puranam* by V. Ganesan.)

Frank H. Humphreys was the first westerner to meet Ramana in 1911 in the Virupaksha cave. The second westerner to meet the Maharshi was journalist Paul Brunton. He met Ramana in the ashram in 1930-1931 after Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swamikal of the Kanchi Mutt had strongly recommended that he meet the Maharishi. The Kanchi Sankaracharya told Brunton, “He is called the Maharishee. His abode is on Arunachala, the Mountain of the Holy Beacon, which is in the territory of North Arcot. Shall I provide you with full instructions so that you may discover him?” The Kanchi Sankaracharya said again, “Promise me that you will not leave South India before you met the Maharishee.”

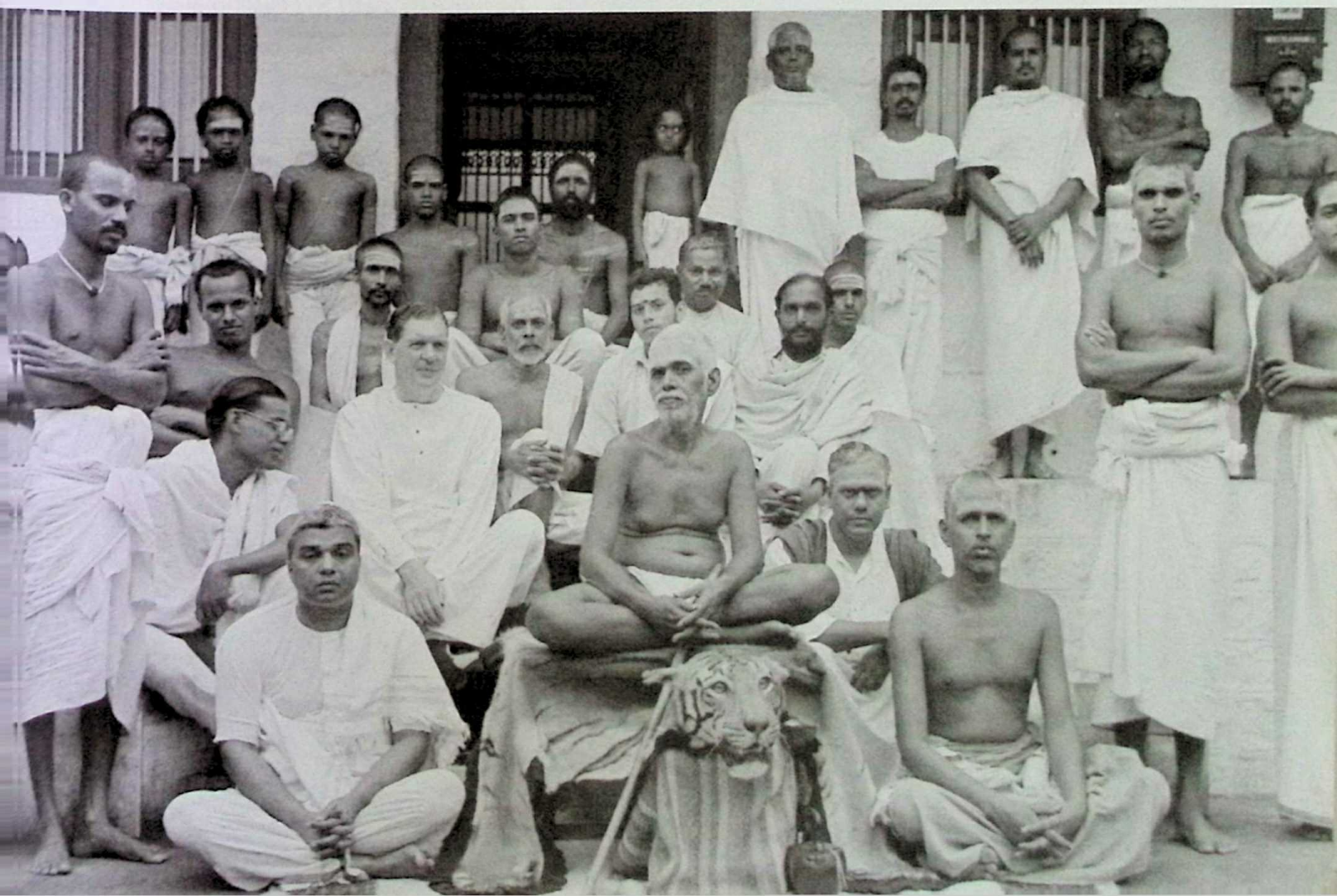
This conversation is contained in Brunton’s book titled, *A Search in Secret India*, which has chapters called “With

the Spiritual Head of South India” and “The Hill of the Holy Beacon”, on his meetings with the Kanchi Sankaracharya and Ramana respectively. The book, which was published in 1934, became a bestseller. It firmly brought the Maharshi to the attention of the western world. Major Chadwick read Brunton’s book, disposed his properties and came to the ashram in 1935, to live there permanently till his death in 1962. He was the third westerner to meet Ramana, after Humphreys and the Bruntons. From then on, there has been an unceasing flow.

Humphreys joined the police department in Vellore in March 1911 when he was 21-years-old and came with Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni to meet the Maharshi in the Virupaksha cave in November that year. Humphreys was interested in occult, astrology, breath control (*hatha yoga*), meditation, whether he could perform miracles, etc. This was how he described his first meeting with Ramana: “God was radiating terrifically [from the Maharshi]. My own feelings were indescribable. The

★ Sri Ramana Maharshi, Swami Niranjanananda (seated, bare-bodied, on Ramana’s left), Major Chadwick, wearing a *kurta*, and pupils of Yajur Veda Patasala (standing, in the last row).

- PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM





Maharshi is a man beyond description in his expression of dignity, gentleness, self-control and calm strength of conviction. You can imagine nothing more beautiful than his smile. It is strange, what a change it makes in one to have been in his presence!"

This is how the conversation between the two began.

Humphreys: Master! Can I help the world?

Maharshi: Help yourself and you will help the world.

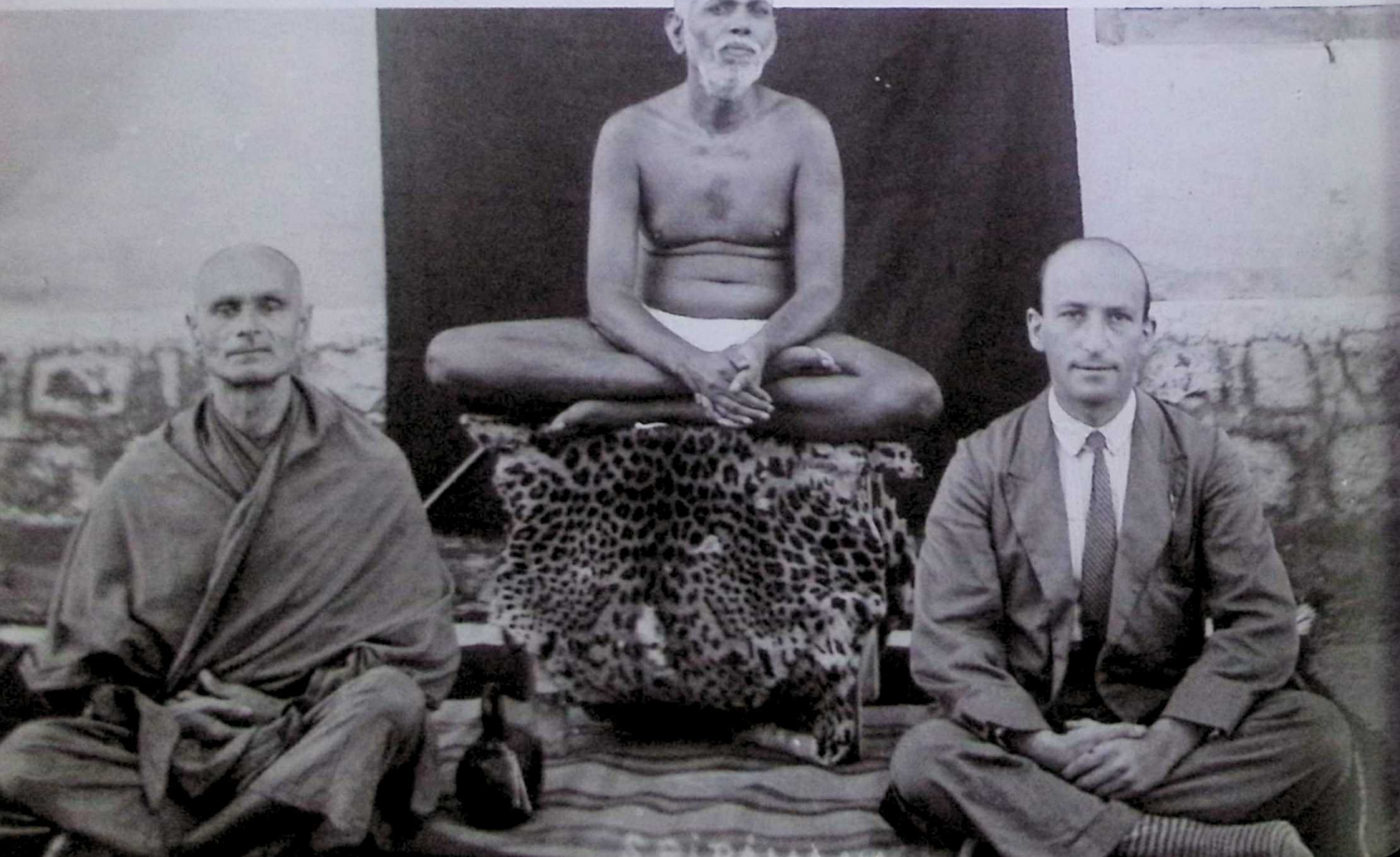
F.H.H.: I wish to help the world. Will I not be helpful?

Maharshi: Yes. Helping yourself, you help the world. You are in the world. You are the world. You are not different from the world. Nor is the world different from you..."

Humphreys met Ramana three times, wrote an account of these meetings including Ramana's teachings to him

• **(Top).** Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swamikal of Kanchipuram Math, who instructed journalist Paul Brunton to meet Sri Ramana Maharshi. - PHOTO: THE HINDU ARCHIVES.
(Bottom). The Maharshi with Swami Pragyananda (*left*) and Paul Brunton.

- PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM

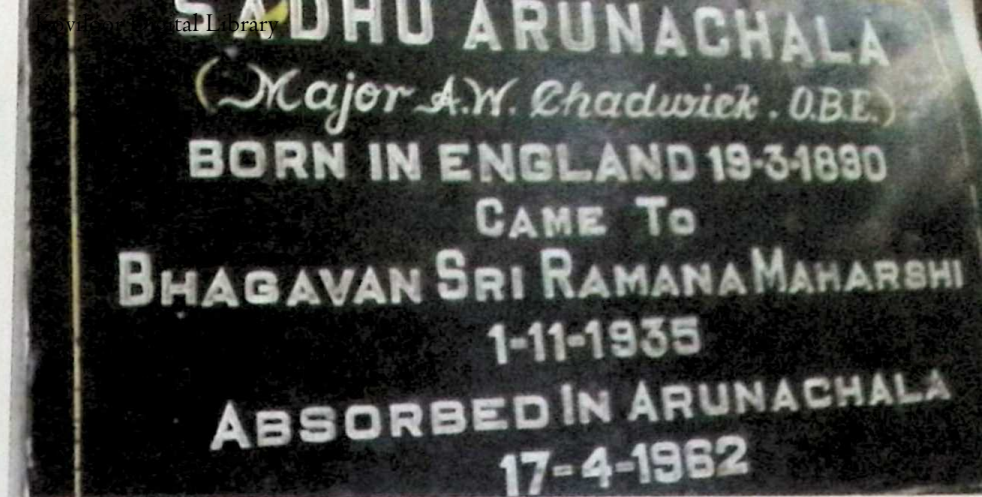


and it was published in the *International Psychic Gazette*. Later, he became a monk in a Roman Catholic monastery in the U.K.

Major Chadwick was a larger-than-life figure. He was six feet and two inches tall, handsome and powerfully-built. He was gregarious too. He read Brunton's book, *A Search in Secret India*, was captivated by what Brunton had written about the Maharshi and journeyed to Tiruvannamalai from the U.K. in 1935. He never went back to England. In his *Ramana Periya Puranam*, Ganesan says, "He [Major Chadwick] was the first westerner to stay permanently in Arunachala at the feet of his chosen master... He knew that Arunachala was his home and Ramana Maharshi his spiritual master. And the next step he took was to renounce... Chadwick became a soldier of god, and gave up his all..."

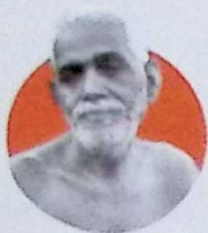
Ramana had a special affection for Chadwick, guided him spiritually and encouraged him in every way to aim at Self-realisation. Chadwick was permitted to build a cottage for himself on the ashram premises. Bhagavan attended the house-warming ceremony in which S.S. Cohen and Brunton were present. Only Yogi Ramaiah, Balarama Reddiar and A. Devaraja Mudaliar were allowed to build rooms for themselves on the ashram premises. On the day Chadwick arrived at the ashram, the Maharshi gave him the booklet *Who am I?* and later B.V. Narasimha Swami's *Self-realisation*. He asked him to read both the books and practise what was contained in them. Chadwick told Ganesan that he formulated his spiritual practice on his study of these two books. According to Ganesan, "Chadwick listened extensively to the dialogues the master had with his devotees and visitors."

Chadwick experienced the spiritual ecstasy of 'I am' where there was no Chadwick, just the 'I am'. He played a big role in reviving the *Veda Patasala* run by the ashram after it was closed down. He died in 1962 in Vellore. His body was interred next to his room on the southern side, on the ashram premises. Ganesan overruled those who opposed his body being interred on the ashram



• **A TRUE DEVOTEE: (Top)** The epitaph written on the tombstone of A.W. Chadwick, who lived in the ashram from 1935 to 1962; **(Middle)** Sri Ramana Maharshi and Chadwick (both partly seen), S.S. Cohen (shading his eyes) and Paul Brunton, all attending the house-warming ceremony of Chadwick's cottage on the ashram campus; **(Bottom)** The Chadwick memorial. - PHOTOS: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN AND SRI RAMANASRAMAM

campus. He told them, "Chadwick is a child of Bhagavan and his body should not be sent out." On the northern side of the same room, his ego has a *samadhi*. "In 1938, he was digging a small grave there. When a few puzzled devotees asked him, "Why are you digging?" he looked at them and said, "It is a *samadhi* for my ego." Bhagavan once visited it, I am told," Ganesan says in his book.



In tune with the Infinite Sri Ramana Maharishi of Tiruvannamalai

From the archives of *The Hindu*

• T. A. K. •



Wednesday next. (27th December) is a day hallowed in the hearts of thousands of devotees of Sri Ramana Maharishi the enlightened one of Arunachala, for he completes sixty years on that day according to the Indian calendar.

Sri Ramana was born at 1 a.m. on 30th December, 1879, the auspicious *arudhra* day. Till 1896, Venkataraman, as Sri Maharishi was then known, lived the life of a typical lad, interesting himself more in sports than in study and finding no abiding interest in either. His seventeenth year was destined to mark a stupendous change in his life. "One day I was sitting alone in the first floor of my uncle's house in Madura," he says, describing the eventful day, "There was nothing wrong with my health but suddenly a fear of death seized me. I felt I was dying: and as certainly as my fear was a new born resolve in me to meet death squarely in its face. What is death: cessation of bodily activities, no sooner I thought of this, I feigned death even to the minute detail of rigor mortis: even then the 'I' feeling continued to exist: therefore I am the deathless spirit. All this flashed past me effortlessly. Fear of death vanished leaving in its place a deathless spirit revolving round an 'I'. From thenceforth I lost all interest in the objective world getting absorbed in myself: out with this introversion there dawned upon me an emotional urge towards temples and deities and towards the universe signified

by them: and even here there was no conscious craving for liberation as I knew naught the pains and pleasures of life: deep emotions flowed in and out of my being without any volition." It is this last note of the Maharishi's Being that arrests our attention and makes us all devotees at the shrine of a life lived "in tune with the Infinite."

The call of the infinite

The call of the Infinite was insistent and in 1896, Sri Maharishi fled from his house seeking refuge in his Overlord, Arunachala of Tiruvannamalai. A few years prior to this the very mention of the word Arunachala had touched a responsive vibrant chord in Sri Maharishi and to Him his attention now turned. The short note Sri Maharishi left for his elder brother reveals a unique feature—the descent of Divine Grace on Maharishi in its full measure, like a cloud-burst pouring out torrents of rain on a sunscorched land. The note runs: "In quest of my Father and pursuant to his behest I have left this place. This has indeed started on a good objective. Therefore no one need feel sorry for this. Also no money need be wasted on tracking this down." When it is the Father that calls, the child needs no guide and Sri Maharishi reached the temple of Arunachala at Tiruvannamalai on 1st September, 1896.

To attempt to give a life story of Sri Maharishi will be futile. During the period of his stay in the temple and in

IN TUNE WITH THE INFINITE

SRI RAMANA MAHARISHI OF TIRUVANNAMALAI

By T. A. K.

WEDNESDAY next, (27th December) is a day hallowed in the hearts of thousands of devotees of Sri Ramana Maharishi, the enlightened one of Arunachala, for he completed sixty years on that day according to the Indian calendar.

Sri Ramana was born at 1 a.m. on 30th December, 1879, the auspicious *ardra* day. Till 1896, Venkataraman, as Sri Maharishi was then known, lived the life of a typical lad, interesting himself more in sports than in study and finding no abiding interest in either. His seventeenth year was destined to mark a stupendous change in his life. "One day I was sitting alone in the first floor of my uncle's house in Madurai," he says, describing the eventful day. "There was nothing wrong with my health but suddenly a fear of death seized me. I felt I was dying; and as certainly as my fear was a new born resolve in me to meet death squarely in its face. What is death: cessation of bodily activities, no sooner I thought of this, I felt death even to the minute detail of rigor mortis: even then the 'I' feeling continued to exist; therefore I am the deathless spirit. All this flashed past me effortlessly. Fear of death vanished leaving in its place a deathless spirit revolving round an 'I'. From thenceforth I lost all interest in the objective world getting absorbed in myself; out with this introversion there dawned upon me an emotional urge towards temples and deities and towards the universe signified by them; and even here there was no conscious craving for liberation as I knew naught the pains and pleasures of life; deep emotions flowed in and out of my being without any volition." It is this last note of the Maharishi's Being that arrests our attention and makes us all devotees at the shrine of a life lived "in tune with the Infinite."

THE CALL OF THE INFINITE

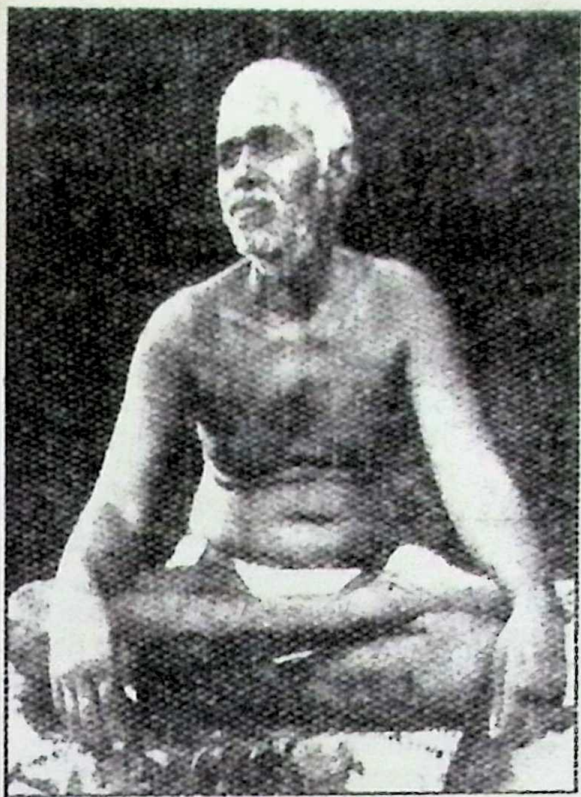
The call of the Infinite was insistent and in 1896, Sri Maharishi fled from his house seeking refuge in his Overlord, Arunachala of Tiruvannamalai. A few years prior to this the very mention of the word Arunachala had touched a responsive vibrant chord in Sri Maharishi and to Him his attention now turned. The short note Sri Maharishi left for his elder brother reveals a unique feature—the descent of Divine Grace on Maharishi in its full measure, like a cloud-burst pouring out torrents of rain on a sun-scorched land. The note runs: "In quest of my Father and pursuant to his behest I have left this place. This has indeed started on a good objective. Therefore no one need feel sorry for this. Also no money need be wasted on tracking this down." When it is the Father that calls, the child needs no guide and Sri Maharishi reached the temple of Arunachala at Tiruvannamalai on 1st September, 1896.

To attempt to give a life story of Sri Maharishi will be futile. During

the period of his stay in the temple and in different parts in and around it, he was so constantly in the *samadhi* state that his brief periods of world consciousness were awaited with avidity by his devotees to gain solace; and even in these brief spells, Sri Maharishi was a mount, vowed to silence. After two and a half years (and it was during the end of this period that his mother made a futile attempt to get her son back) Sri Maharishi went up the hill of Arunachala and remained there for about twenty years in one cave or another. Many of his devotees were adherents of a particular system of philosophic thought, viz., the *Advaita*, thanks partly to the magnificent efforts of Swami Vivekananda who caught the intelligentsia of the world in his magic grip; and it was therefore not surprising that they came to Sri Maharishi for elucidation of the knotty points in such renowned works of *Advaitic* thought, as 'Yoga-Vasishtani', 'Viveka-Chudamani' and 'Kaivalya-Navaneetham.' He even compiled easy renderings in Tamil prose of 'Viveka-Chudamani' and 'Dhriku-Dhrisya Nivekam'—two well-known works of Sri Sankaracharya for the benefit of such devotees; but his instruction to an aspirant after Truth, not bound by any system of Indian Philosophy, throws a flood of light on what constitutes true inward spiritual uplift. Says the Maharishi: "It is useless to take any intellectual stand and work from that. Useless to speculate. It is only religion. It can take us only near one point where all religions meet and no further. That one point is the realisation—not in any mystic sense—but in the most worldly, everyday practical sense that God is everything and everything is God."

MAHARISHI'S MESSAGE

To the three spiritually learned Pundits who came into contact with the Maharishi, the world owes a deep debt of gratitude. Kavyakanta Ganapathi Sastri placed us in deep debt. His 'Ramana-Gita' (with the single exception of a *shloka* composed by the Maharishi himself) are redactions of the sage's teaching on various occasions in smooth, rhythmic Sanskrit. His poignant outpourings at the feet of Sri Ramana Maharishi and the sweet voice offered by the sage to that distressed soul contain the very core of His Message. To Sastri who prayed for enlightenment on the nature of *tapas*, Bhagawan said: "If one watches whence this notion 'I' springs, the mind gets merged into that. That is *tapas*." To quote further the Maharishi's message from the 'Ramana-Gita'—"The mortal is aware of the mind only when the heart has not blossomed, just as moon is seen only when the sun has not appeared. In devotion the thought-current is violently turned back into its inherent state and source—the Heart." It is 'Para Bhakti' in which the 'I' ceases, the root of all thought and of mind, is offered on the altar of its very source.



Sri Ramana Maharishi.

Seshadriswami, the second of the trio, was a fine scholar himself and had advanced a little further than Ganapathi Sastri on the path of spiritual liberation. Indeed, Seshadri, compared to the Maharishi, was the earlier arrival at Tiruvannamalai. He was also a bachelor-saint and he zealously guarded the Maharishi during his *Samadhi* state. He spent his time constantly with the Maharishi both in the temple and on the Hill and he always told his disciples that seeing the Maharishi cleansed thoroughly the mind from sin. Seshadri like Sri Maharishi, advised people to adhere to the particular path they had chosen for spiritual development.

Narasimhaswami, more popularly known as B. V. N. of the Home Rule movement, distinguished himself as the author of the best book on the life and teachings of Sri Ramana Maharishi by name 'Self-Realisation.' His English translation with notes of the Maharishi's 'Upadesa Saram' is also well-known.

To continue the thread of our narrative. Domestic tribulations befell Alagannal, the mother of Sri Maharishi, and about 1916, she felt that the only place where she could get real peace was with her son at Tiruvannamalai. Soon after her arrival, there came the Swami's younger brother. The mother assumed Kashaya and was dispassionately performing the rites of hospitality at the Swami's Ashram. In May 1922, she took seriously ill and died on the 19th May with Sri Maharishi by her side adminis-

tering spiritual comfort. His devotees erected a small temple over the mortal remains of his mother, *Matrubhootha*, a sacred shrine, and have since been observing the day of her death by feeding thousands of poor and by other appropriate ceremonies.

"*Ulladu Narpadu*" can rightly be called the *magnum opus* of the Maharishi's works. The message contained therein is quite comprehensive and refers to be pigeon-holed in any of the six systems of philosophy. And naturally too, if religion begins where philosophy ends and if religion itself is, with the Maharishi, but a pointer towards the Real, a work that treats of the Real must transcend both philosophy and religion, and "*Ulladu Narpadu*" is Sri Ramana Hridayam. His revelation of Himself is effected in the most direct and simple method—to be and to live forever in the fountain-head of the 'I' sense.

A few words on Ramanastram, the temple of Sri Ramana Maharishi, will be helpful to those seeking refuge in quiet and peace as an escape from these days of stress and self-aggravation. The *Aram* is situated just at the foot of Arunachala Hill, a mile away from Tiruvannamalai city. Indeed all distractions are effaced as a practical working measure and everyone is free to go to the audience hall where the Maharishi radiates grace which, however, is assimilated by the visitors in the measure of their competence, but with the Maharishi himself there is no distinction between the prince and the pauper, the philosopher and the fool. He is as kind towards an innocent little child toddling towards him as towards an epicure steeped deep in sense pleasure protruding before him. At all hours, of the day, without let or hindrance, the craft that has lost its moorings on the stormy ocean of *Samsara* finds a ready harbour in the expansive heart of Sri Bhagawan Ramana Maharishi.

We close this short sketch with a translation of a couple of Tamil lines placed by us at the feet of Sri Maharishi as our *Guru Dakshina*.

"Endowing the Tyrant, thou feedest him with the food of knowledge, O Ramana Deva!
Him that knows naught but that God is his food, thou hast devoured, O, Ramana Deva!"

different parts in and around it, he was so constantly in the *samadhi* state that his brief periods of world consciousness were awaited with avidity by his devotees to gain solace; and even in these brief spells, Sri Maharishi was a *mouni*, vowed to silence. After two and a half years (and it was during the end of this period that his mother made a futile attempt to get her son back) Sri Maharishi went up the hill of Arunachala and remained there for about twenty years in one cave or another. Many of his devotees were adherents of a particular system of philosophic thought, viz., the *Advaita*, thanks partly to the magnificent efforts of Swami

Vivekananda who caught the intelligentsia of the world in his magic grip; and it was therefore not surprising that they came to Sri Maharishi for elucidation of the knotty points in such renowned works of *Advaitic* thought, as 'Yoga-Vasishtani', 'Viveka-Chudamani' and 'Kaivalya-Navaneetham.' He even compiled easy renderings in Tamil prose of 'Viveka-Chudamani' and 'Dhriku-Dhrisya Nivekam'—two well-known works of Sri Sankaracharya for the benefit of such devotees; but his instruction to an aspirant after Truth not bound by

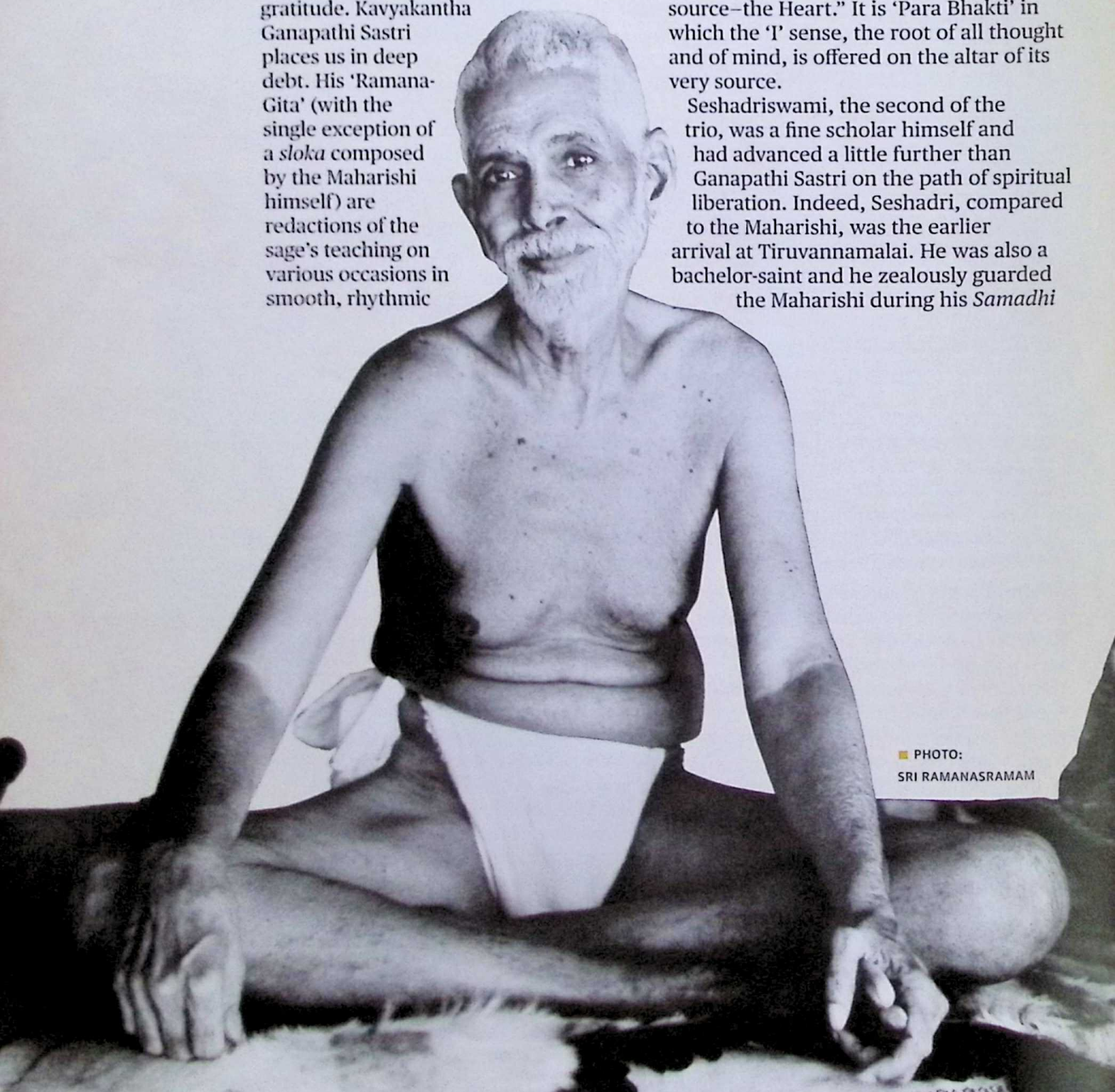
any system of Indian Philosophy, throws a flood of light on what constitutes true inward spiritual uplift. Says the Maharishi: "It is useless to take any intellectual stand and work from that, useless to speculate. It is only religion. It can take us only near one point where all religions meet and no further. That one point is the realisation—not in any mystic sense—but in the most worldly, everyday practical sense that God is everything and everything is God."

Maharishi's message

To the three spiritually learned Pundits who came into contact with the Maharishi, the world owes a deep debt of gratitude. Kavyakantha Ganapathi Sastri places us in deep debt. His 'Ramana-Gita' (with the single exception of a *sloka* composed by the Maharishi himself) are redactions of the sage's teaching on various occasions in smooth, rhythmic

Sanskrit. His poignant outpourings at the feet of Sri Ramana Maharishi and the sweet solace offered by the sage to that distressed soul contain the very core of His Message. To Sastrigal who prayed for enlightenment on the nature of *tapas*, Bhagawan said: "If one watches whence this notion 'I' springs, the mind gets merged into that. That is *tapas*." To quote further the Maharishi's message from the 'Ramana-Gita'—"The mortal is aware of the mind only when the heart has not blossomed, just as moon is seen only when the sun has not appeared. In devotion the thought-current is violently turned back into its inherent state and source—the Heart." It is 'Para Bhakti' in which the 'I' sense, the root of all thought and of mind, is offered on the altar of its very source.

Seshadriswami, the second of the trio, was a fine scholar himself and had advanced a little further than Ganapathi Sastri on the path of spiritual liberation. Indeed, Seshadri, compared to the Maharishi, was the earlier arrival at Tiruvannamalai. He was also a bachelor-saint and he zealously guarded the Maharishi during his *Samadhi*



■ PHOTO:
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

His revelation of Himself is effected in the most direct and simple method—to be and to live forever in the fountainhead of the 'I' sense

state. He spent his time constantly with the Maharishi both in the temple and on the Hill and he always told his disciples that seeing the Maharishi cleansed thoroughly the mind from sin. Seshadri like Sri Maharishi, advised people to adhere to the particular path they had chosen for spiritual developments.

Narasimhaswami, more popularly known as B. V. N. of the Home Rule movement, distinguished himself as the author of the best book on the life and teachings of Sri Ramana Maharishi by name 'Self-Realisation.' His English translation with notes of the Maharishi's 'Upanadesa Saram's is also well-known.

To continue the thread of our narrative, domestic tribulations befell Alagammal, the mother of Sri Maharishi and about 1916, she felt that the only place where she could get real peace was with her son at Tiruvannamalai. Soon after her arrival, there came the Swami's younger brother. The mother assumed *Kashaya* and was dispassionately performing the rites of hospitality at the Swami's Ashram. In May 1922, she took seriously ill and died on the 19th May with Sri Maharishi by her side administering spiritual comfort. His devotees erected a small temple over the mortal remains of his mother, Mathrubootheswarar sanctum, and have since been observing the day of her death by feeding thousands of poor and by other appropriate ceremonies.

"Ulladu Narpadu" can rightly be called the magnum opus of the Maharishi's works. The message contained therein is quite comprehensive and refuses to be pigeon-holed in any of the six systems of philosophy. And naturally too. If religion begins where philosophy ends and if religion itself is, with the Maharishi, but a pointer towards the Real, a work that treats of the Real must transcend both philosophy and religion, and "Ulladu

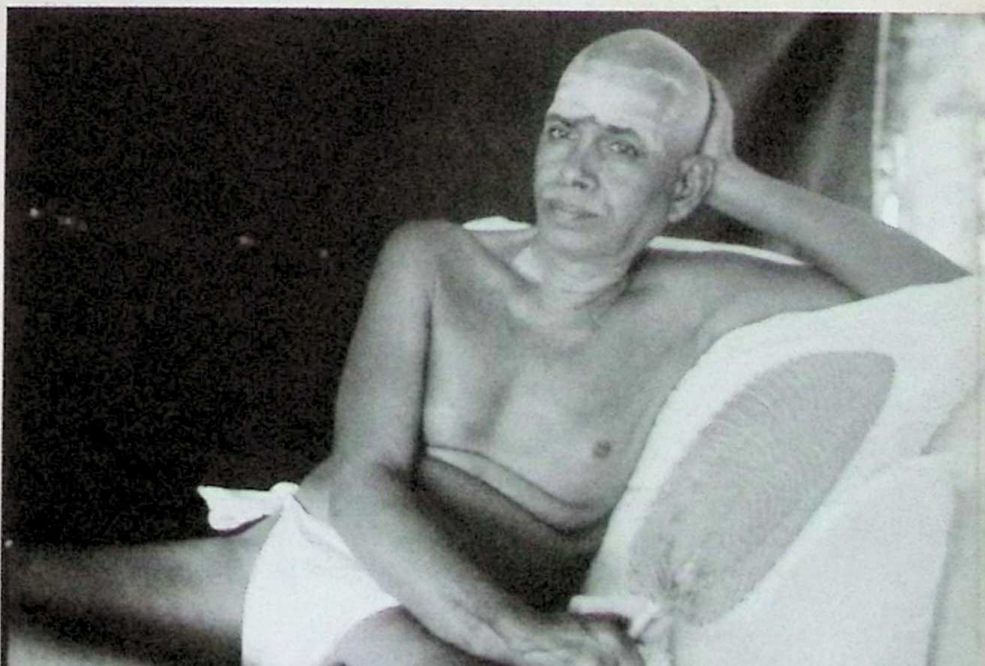
Narpadu" is *Sri Ramana Hridayam*. His revelation of Himself is effected in the most direct and simple method—to be and to live forever in the fountainhead of the 'I' sense.

A few words on Ramanasram, the temple of Sri Ramana Maharishi, will be helpful to those seeking refuge in quiet and peace as an escape from these days of stress and self-aggrandisement. The Ashram is situated just at the footsteps of Arunachala Hill, a mile away from Tiruvannamalai city. Indeed all distractions are effaced as a practical working measure and everyone is free to go to the audience hall where the Maharishi radiates grace, which, however is assimilated by the visitors in the measure of their competence, but with the Maharishi himself there is no distinction between the prince and the pauper, the philosopher and the fool. He is as kind towards an innocent little child toddling towards him as towards an epicure steeped deep in sense pleasure prostrating before him. At all hours, of the day, without let or hindrance, the craft that has lost its moorings on the stormy ocean of *Samsara* finds a ready harbour in the expansive heart of Sri Baghawan, Ramana Maharishi.

We close this short sketch with a translation of a couple of Tamil lines placed by us at the feet of Sri Maharishi as our *Guru Dakshina*.

"Enslaving the Tyrant, thou feedest him with the food of knowledge, O, Ramana Deva! Him that knows naught but that God is his food, thou hast devoured, O, Ramana Deva!!

■ PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM



The Hindu

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)
TIRUVANNAMALAI. APRIL 14. 1950



Sri Ramana Rishi passes away Peaceful end at Tiruvannamalai Great saint and seer

From the archives of *The Hindu*, published on April 15, 1950

Sri Ramana Maharshi passed away to-night at 8-47 p.m., News that the Maharshi had attained *Videha mukti* was conveyed to the thousands of devotees at the Ramana ashram when they were reciting verses from the *Arunachalamalai*, composed by the Maharshi himself.

An all-night recitation of the compositions of the Maharshi and Vedaparayana is being held. The *Mahasamadhi* will take place to-morrow.

Meteor seen over ashram

A meteor of unusually big size and brilliance was seen in the sky exactly at the time when Bhagwan Sri Ramana attained *Videha Mukthi*. The devotees gathered at the Ashram were thrilled by the sight of the phenomenon and its coincidence with the sage's passing away. (The meteor was observed by many in the City also).

The Maharshi was suffering from cancer in his left arm for the last 14 months and underwent four major operations. Almost all the leading exponents of allopathy, homoeopathy and ayurveda who came into close contact with him at various times during these days had the highest praise for the way he put up with this painful malady and his unfailing cheerfulness. They gave open expression to the view that none but the Bhagwan would have faced that

disease with such fortitude.

News of the saint's passing away spread through the town in a few seconds and thousands of devotees rushed to the ashram to pay their homage.

The Maharshi's brother Sri Nirajananda Swami, Sarvadhikari, and Mr. T. N. Venkataraman, Manager of the ashram, Sri Pichu Aiyar and Alamelu Ammal, brother-in-law and sister of the Maharshi, went and had the last darshan of the sage at 7-30 p.m.

The District Medical Officer the District Superintendent of Police and all important officers, as also Mr. O. P. Ramaswami Reddiar, are here.

A God-centred personality

The passing away of the Maharshi removes from the midst of his fellowmen a figure of the first magnitude in the sphere of Hindu religion and spirituality.

Born on 30th December, 1879 at Tiruchuzhi (Madura), Venkataramana (former name of the Bhagavan) had quite a normal childhood. He was inconspicuous at school, for his mind dwelt by instinct on other things. Once, when he was 15, he heard somebody mention the name "Arunachala." It sent a thrill through him, gave point to the vague spiritual longing which filled him. Some five months later, he read the *Periyapuranam*. The holy book filled him with admiration for the Saivite saints of

SRI RAMANA RISHI PASSES AWAY

PEACEFUL END AT
TIRUVANNAMALAI

GREAT SAINT AND SEER

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT)

TIRUVANNAMALAI, April 14
Sri Ramana Maharshi passed away to-night at 8-47 p.m.

News that the Maharshi had attained *videha mukti* was conveyed to the thousands of devotees at the Ramanashram when they were reciting verses from the *Arunachalamalai* composed by the Maharshi himself.



Sri Ramana Maharshi

An all-night recitation of the compositions of the Maharshi and Vedaparayana is being held. The Mahasamadhi will take place to-morrow.

METEOR SEEN OVER ASHRAM

A meteor of unusually big size and brilliance was seen in the sky exactly at the time when Bhagwan Sri Ramana attained *Videha Mukti*. The devotees gathered at the Ashram were thrilled by the sight of the phenomenon and its coincidence with the sage's passing away. (The meteor was observed by many in the City also).

The Maharshi was suffering from cancer in his left arm for the last 14 months and underwent four major operations. Almost all the leading exponents of allopathy, homoeopathy and ayurveda who came into close contact with him at various times during these days had the highest praise for the way he put up with this painful malady and his unflinching cheerfulness. They gave open expression to the view that none but the Bhagwan would have faced that disease with such fortitude.

News of the saint's passing away spread through the town in a few seconds and thousands of devotees rushed to the ashram to pay their homage.

The Maharshi's brother Sri Niranjanananda Swami, Saradanidhar, and Mr. T. N. Venkataraman, Manager of the ashram, Sri Pichu Aiyar and Alamelu Arunai, brother-in-law and sister of the Maharshi, went and had the last darshan of the sage at 7-30 p.m.

The District Medical Officer, the District Superintendent of Police and all important officers as also Mr. O. P. Ramaswami Reddier, are here

A GOD-CENTRED PERSONALITY

The passing away of the Maharshi removes from the midst of his followers a figure of the first magnitude in the sphere of Hindu religion and spirituality.

Born on 16th December, 1878 at Tiruchur (Madurai), Venkataramana (former name of the Bhagwan) had quite a normal childhood. He was inconspicuous at school for his mind dwelt by instinct on other things. Once when he was 15, he heard somebody mention the name "Arunachala." It sent a thrill through him, gave point to the vague spiritual longing which filled him. Some five months later, he read the *Periyepparvam*. The holy book filled him with admiration for the Savic saints of the past and with a longing to shape his own life on the same lines of austerity as theirs. He neglected school and haunted the lonely spots in the corridors of the Meenakshi temple, sat in unfrequented corners and lost himself in thought. About this time too he was attracted to a young girl who was unmarried and the mind was

the past and with a longing to shape his own life on the same lines of austerity as theirs. He neglected school and haunted the lonely spots in the corridors of the Meenakshi temple, sat in unfrequented corners and lost himself in thought. About this time too he was obsessed by a feeling that death was imminent and felt the need to examine closely its true significance. Such contemplation revealed to him the deathlessness of the spirit, of the oneness of his own spirit with the universal spirit—not as an intellectual theory merely but as a burning, vital fact which was of imminent concern to him. It led him to the discovery that his place was no longer in his childhood home but in "Arunachala", in the shadow of the great rock of peace, light and grace.

The call from Arunachala

His mind was ripe for renunciation and soon enough, the occasion came when he could break away from the past. One day his brother scolded him for his neglect of his work at school (Venkataramana was then in the Fifth Form)—asked him why, if he was so much in love with meditation, he should stick to his home. The boy took it as the long-expected call from Sri Arunachala. His brother had permitted him to take five rupees to pay the school fees: he took three instead to pay his trainfare to Tindivanam. He was late for the train but the train was late too—he did not miss it. This was on August 29, 1896. Several circumstances combined to guide the inexperienced boy on the road to Tiruvannamalai. On September 1, he arrived at his destination. From the station he went straight to the temple; the doors were wide open for him though the hour was early.

From then on he made Tiruvannamalai his abode. His penance was rigorous, his unconcern for appearances profound. In the first days, the very unusualness of his attitude provoked ridicule and hostility which, lacking the power to make any impression on him, crumbled before his great calm. Once he was found in an underground chamber of the temple (now renovated as the Patala Lingam, shrine and declared open by Mr. C. Rajagopalachari) covered all over by vermin and bleeding from open wounds

but completely oblivious of pain. People began to respect him as a true *tapasvi*. His brother and mother coming to learn of his whereabouts, once came to fetch him back home but he turned them away. (His mother later returned to spend her last years in his ashram).

A well-known poet and scholar, Kavyakanta Ganapati Sastri, who saw him in that cave recognised his spiritual greatness and proclaimed him to the world as a great seer. It was he who first hailed him as Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Disciples and devotees gathered around him and in time the Ramanashram came to be built at a little distance from the town. To this centre, over the last 50 years, people came from all parts of the world in increasing numbers in quest of spiritual progress.

The Maharshi no doubt kept himself aloof from the swirl of politics, but he understood India's struggle for freedom as part of a lofty spiritual endeavour. Some years ago when the late Shri Jamnalai Bajaj and Dr. Rajendra Prasad visited his *ashram*, the Maharshi agreed that the desire for Swaraj was right and added. "Prolonged practical work for the goal gradually widens the outlook so that the individual becomes gradually merged in the country. Such merging of the individual is desirable and the karma is *nishkamya karma*."

When about to depart, Dr. Prasad put him the question. "Mahatmaji has sent me here. Is there any message that I may take to him?"

"What message is needed when heart speaks to heart?" the Maharshi replied. "The same *shakti* that is working here is also working there."

Mr. C. Rajagopalachari's words when he opened the Pathala Lingam cave recently sum up the place the Maharshi occupies in the galaxy of the great saints and seers who have made India great and kept alive her tradition. C. R. said, "Let us tender our tribute of reverence and homage to the Enlightened Soul and let us be worthy of him. The Maharshi has kept India's spiritual glory alive in our generations. He has in his own way made the name of India respected by wise and enlightened men spread all over the world even as Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and other saints did in former times".

Sri Ramana Maharshi

The ~~India~~ Hindu.

THE HINDU, APRIL 17, 1950

Editorial from the archival pages of *The Hindu*

The news of the passing of Sri Ramana Maharshi will be received with profound sorrow by his countrymen; millions of them who had never seen the sage in the flesh revered him as a *jivan-mukta*. And many earnest and sensitive souls all over the world for whom he posed the eternal values will mourn the loss of a living link with the ancient wisdom of India. The saints establish their empire over the hearts of men not by what they do but by what they are. They are the incorruptible witnesses to the Truth which lies beyond all appearance. Their life is all of a peace and the harmony they achieve seems something miraculous to an age whose characteristic malady is the split personality. To the man who struggles in the fever and fret of competitive living their graciousness comes like a cool mountain breeze. Even the secular rebel, who prides himself on the courage of his convictions in dealing with social institutions and intellectual systems, is too often a timorous conformist in the realm of the spirit, affirming or denying according to the fashion of the day or the climate of opinion in which he is brought up. It is the seers like Sri Ramana who swim the uncharted sea of the soul

and plant their flag on *ultima Thule*.

It was no new doctrine that the sage of Arunachala taught. "Know Thyself" is a teaching as old as humanity. And in ancient India the Science of the Self was perfected with greater insight and the practical means of realisation were devised with a more comprehensive understanding of the infinite variety of human dispositions than anywhere else in the world. What was new was the quiet confidence the Maharshi felt, and apparently succeeded in communicating to those *en rapport* with him, that the hardest way was also the simplest. *Vichara*, the path of discrimination, is commonly regarded as best followed by those who have subjected themselves to a long and rigorous preliminary discipline with the aim of stilling the mind and removing the impediments to the unfettered operation of the pure intelligence.

The conditions of modern life are not very favourable to *tapas*. But the man who is in dead earnest and feels the compulsive power of an urgency which leaves him no rest may, for aught we know, be able to achieve at one leap a foothold on that Unwobbling Pivot of which the Chinese mystic speaks. It is at any rate part of the

common Indian tradition that, in the difficult act of self-transcendence, the *guru* can lend a helping hand. And the Maharshi's followers have testified that the help and succour from him, though it might not always be extended at the conscious level, was pervasive and continuous. Even so sceptical an observer as Somerset Maugham has recorded in his *A Writer's Notebook* an incident which bears striking testimony to this healing touch. Visiting the Ashram, he was taken ill with one of his recurrent attacks of giddiness.

The Maharshi hearing of it visited him in the hut where he was lying and left after a few minutes' friendly chat. The sensational American Press misreported this, saying that Mr. Maugham had fallen into a hypnotic trance under the penetrating gaze of the sage. The novelist, while showing how this pretty story was a travesty, adds thoughtfully, "It is a fact that I did feel distinctly better" after the Maharshi's visit.

There are no limits to the saving power of a good man's thought. The age of the atom bomb will also go down into history as the age of the Mahatma and the Maharshi. If humanity is not to be submerged in the chaos of its own making, it must give more heed to its sages and seers.



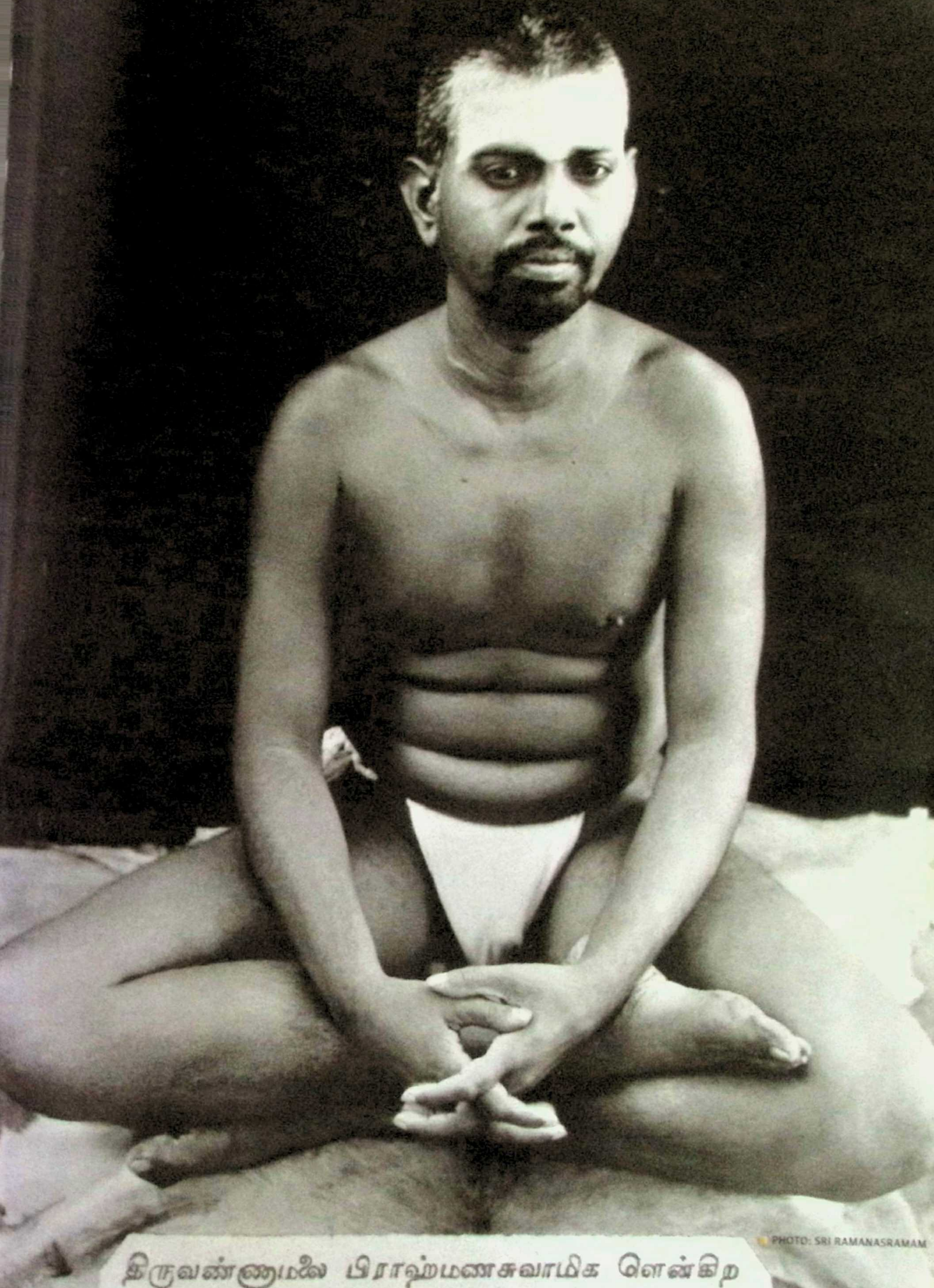


PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM

திருவண்ணாமலை பிராழ்மணசுவாமிக ளென்கிற
ஸ்ரீ ரமண மஹர்ஷிகள்.



The esoteric significance of darshan at the Annamalaiyar temple in Tiruvannamalai

A close look at the temple and its spiritual significance

▪ PHILLIP LUCAS ▪

When the mind moves even a little, that is samsara (worldly bondage); when the mind abides firmly and motionlessly (in the state of Self), that is mukti (liberation). This is certain. Therefore know that wise ones must hold their minds firm by supreme Self-awareness.

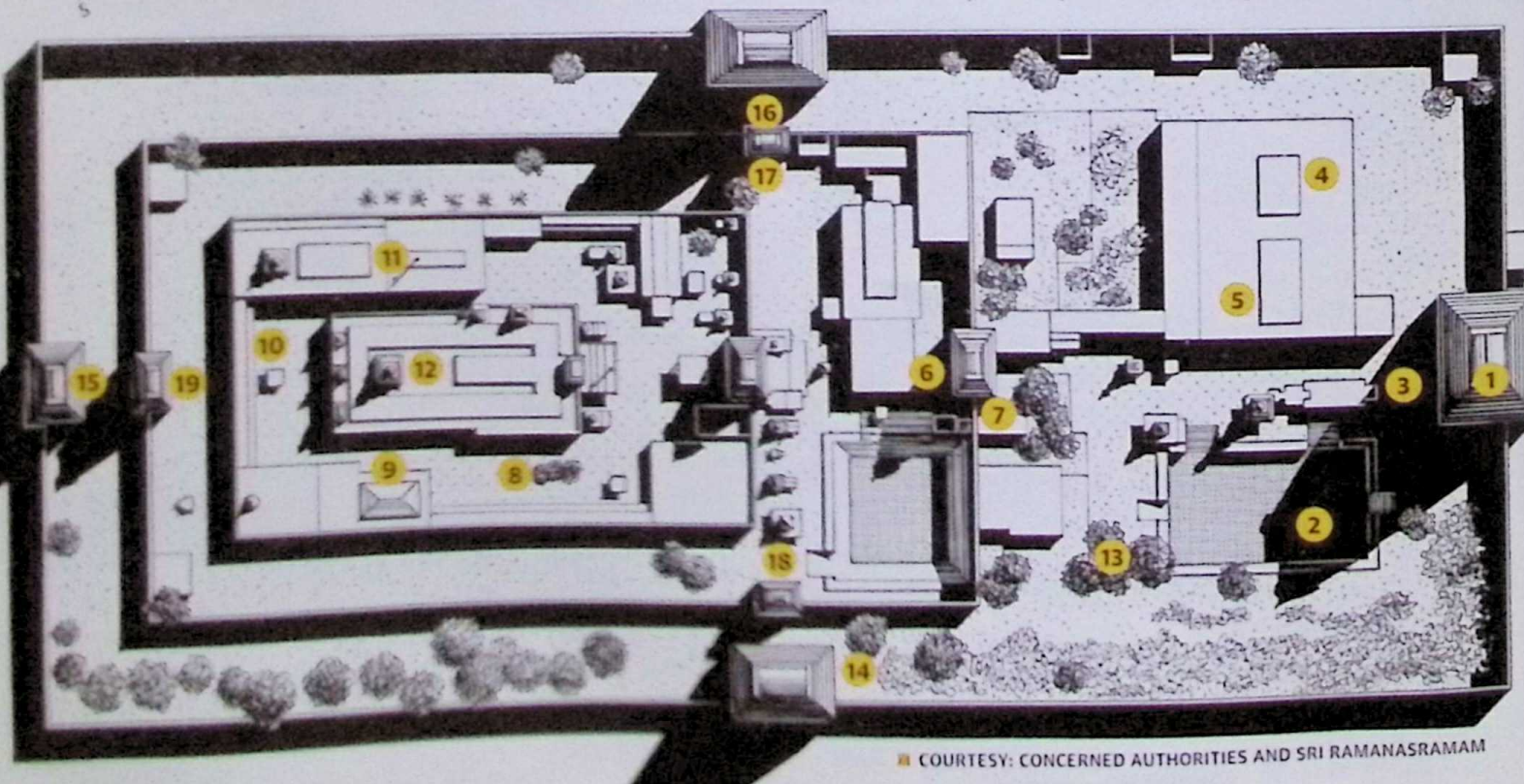
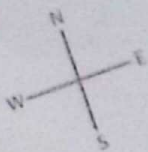
- Devikalottara, vv. 10

The Annamalaiyar* Temple in Tiruvannamalai is a significant pilgrimage destination for millions of Siva devotees each year, including

*The temple's Tamil name for Siva. His consort Parvati is called Unnamalaiyar Ambal in Tamil.

pilgrims to Sri Ramanasramam. Built over a thousand-year period between the 9th and 19th centuries, it is part of a circuit of five Siva *sthalas* in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh known as the *Pancha Bhutas* (five elements). Each of these temples is associated with one of the five elements of Indian cosmology. These elements, including earth, water, fire, air, and *akash* (space) are seen as the constituent building blocks – along with the three *gunas*, or modalities of energy – of the phenomenal universe. They also make up, in varying combinations,

▪ The map of the Arunachaleswara temple complex with the legends.



the subtle and gross bodies of human beings. Pilgrims visit these *sthalas*—the earth/Ekambareshwarar Temple at Kanchipuram; the water/Jambukeshwarar Temple in Thiruvanaikaval; the fire/Annamalaiyar Temple); the air/Srikalahasthi Temple in Sri Kalahasthi; and the space/Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram – in search of both material and spiritual blessings. The intense *bhakti* (devotion) expressed in the various pujas and other rites purifies the mind and heart while the *darshans* at the *lingam* shrines balance and purify the five elements active in the pilgrims' physical and subtle bodies. Each of the *Pancha Bhuta sthalas* lies about 120 kilometres from the next temple in the circuit, and three, Sri Kalahasthi, Kanchipuram, and Chidambaram, are located at 79E70 longitude. Thiruvanaikaval and Tiruvannamalai are located on a longitudinal line that aligns with Kedarnath in the north and Rameshwaram in the south, two of the 12 Jyotirlingam temples. These last three temples are significant for Siva devotees as they celebrate Siva's manifestation as a pillar of fire, the Lingodbhava. Pilgrimage to them is seen as a particularly auspicious and holy undertaking. The symbolism of the Lingodbhava reveals the deeper significance of the Fire Lingam temple at Tiruvannamalai, as we shall see.

Many pilgrims to Sri Ramanasramam visit the Fire Temple and are

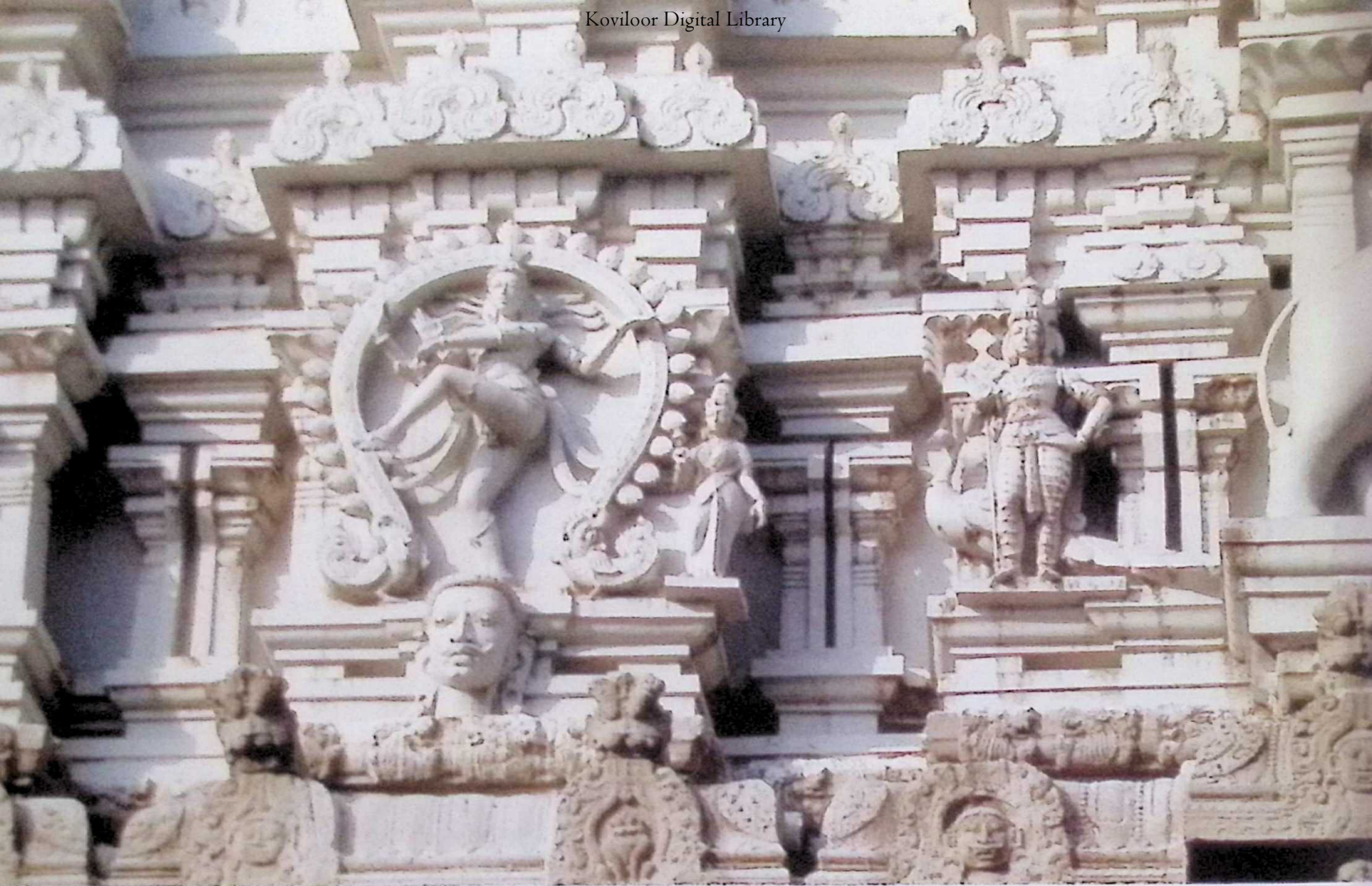
- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Eastern Gopuram | 11. Amman Kovil-Apitakuchambal |
| 2. Sivaganga Tank | 12. Garbha Griha Arunachaleswara |
| 3. Kambattu - Ilayanaar Shrine | 13. Iluppai Tree |
| 4. Thousand-pillared Mantapam | 14. Tirumanjana Gopuram - (South) |
| 5. Patala Linga | 15. Perumal Gopuram (Pey Gopuram) - (West) |
| 6. Vallala Gopuram | 16. Ammani Ammal Gopuram - (North) |
| 7. Kili Gopuram | 17. Kattai Gopuras |
| 8. Sthala Vriksha-Vakula (Magilam) Tree | 18. Kattai Gopuras |
| 9. Kalyana Mantapam | 19. Kattai Gopuras |
| 10. Mantapam dedicated to Arunagiri Yogi | |

overwhelmed by its architectural grandeur and profound spiritual atmosphere. This article attempts to orient devotees to the temple and its traditions by addressing three questions: 1. What is the spiritual significance of the Fire Lingam at Annamalaiyar temple?; 2. How do the temple and its shrines and rites embody the deeper spiritual significance of Arunachala itself?; 3. How is the temple's symbolism and power reflected in the teachings of Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi?

According to various traditions (including the Skanda and Arunachala Puranas), the Annamalaiyar Temple is a *mukta sthala*, a sacred precinct where one can gain *moksha*, or final liberation. A verse in the Skanda Purana declares, "I truly abide on earth in the form of an effulgence named Arunachala for (bestowing) the attainment (of Liberation). Know that it is the heart of the world. It is truly Siva

■ PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM





• The stucco figurines of Nataraja, and Muruga with a peacock on a *gopura* in the temple complex.

– PHOTO:
© PHILLIP LUCAS

himself! It is his heart-abode, a secret holy region.” In the *Sri Arunachala Mahatmya* Nandi declares, “What cannot be acquired without great pains – the true understanding of Vedanta (Self-realisation) – can be attained by anyone who looks at (this sacred hill) from where it is visible or even mentally thinks of it from afar.”

It has been the testimony of saints and sages, including Bhagavan, that Arunachala is the distillation of *jnana*, the fire of Self-knowledge that burns away *avidya* or ignorance of Reality. Bhagavan also spoke of Arunachala as the spiritual centre of the world. Some traditions claim that Sri Adi Sankara spoke of Arunachala as Mount Meru, the birthplace of the created universe. Geological surveys attest to the fact that this part of Tamil Nadu contains some of the oldest rock formations on the planet.

The Annamalaiyar Temple represents the element fire, and the *tejo* (fire) *lingam* in its sanctum sanctorum is a microcosmic replica of the Mahalingam behind it, the fire mountain Arunachala. The temple’s *lingam*, like the mountain itself, is considered *swayambhu* (or Self-born), meaning it manifested without human agency. Tradition holds that the Fire Lingam is a concentrated form of

Arunachala situated within a sacred architecture designed to amplify the Mahalingam’s all-consuming fire of *jnana* for serious *sadhakas*.

Temples in India are always connected to stories in the Puranas that explain why a particular place was chosen for a sacred enclosure. It is important to keep these sacred histories in mind as we attempt to understand the significance of the Fire Temple for devotees.

The Annamalaiyar Temple is located at the eastern base of Arunachala. Several Puranas describe the origin of the mountain. In the distant past Brahma, the creator god and Vishnu, the preserver god, contended for supremacy. Their contest threatened the cosmic order. Out of compassion for all living beings, Siva, the god of destruction and regeneration, appeared as a pillar of fire before the two contending gods.

Out of the blazing light Siva’s voice challenged Brahma and Vishnu to find the pillar’s upper and lower limits. Whoever did so would be acknowledged as the Supreme God. Vishnu took the form of a boar and began tunnelling into the ground to find the pillar’s lower limit. Brahma took the shape of a swan and soared high into the heavens looking for the pillar’s upper limit. After a thousand

Temple complexes like Annamalaiyar reflect this understanding of the archetypal divine human

years, neither could find the limits.

Humbled by his failure, Vishnu acknowledged Siva as the Supreme God. Brahma lied and claimed he had seen the summit of the pillar. His lie was exposed and he stood humbled before Siva, acknowledging him as the Supreme Reality.

Vishnu and Brahma then asked Siva to remain visible as a *tejo* (fire) *lingam* in the place where he had appeared as the pillar of light. With this tangible sign, they and other devotees could worship him, overcome their negative tendencies, and attain final liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Siva agreed to this request and remained visible as a pillar of fire at the place of his manifestation, Tiruvannamalai. Over subsequent *yugas* (world ages), humanity lost the capacity to see with spiritual eyes and out of compassion, Siva changed his appearance to the present-day red mountain, Arunachala. The figure of Siva appearing as a pillar of fire, the Lingodbhava, is found in many carvings and statues throughout the Annamalaiyar Temple, emphasising its significance for understanding the temple's deeper spiritual meaning.

Before looking more fully into the symbolism of this story and image, we first need to consider the Advaitic teaching concerning the nature and makeup of the human *jiva*, or apparent individual self. In Advaitic understanding the *jiva* is comprised of five *koshas*, or sheaths, each made of progressively more refined grades of subtle matter. The sheaths are both vehicles of manifestation and veils that cover the Self (*Atman*), the *jiva's* true nature. As described in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, they are: 1. the *annamaya kosha*, or physical body, composed of the food we eat – related to the earth element; 2. the *pranamaya kosha*, or subtle energy body, which organises and directs the *prana* (life

energy) to the mind and biological functions like breathing, digestion, and blood circulation – related to the water element; 3. the *manomaya kosha*, or mental body, which processes input from the five senses and governs our habitual responses, including desires, emotions, passions, ambitions, attachments, and activities relative to this sensory input – related to the fire element; 4. the *vijñanamaya kosha* or sheath of intellect, which empowers us to judge, discern, discriminate, and choose the best course of action based ideally on spiritual understanding and moral reasoning – related to the air element; and 5. the *anandamaya kosha*, or bliss sheath, which reflects the essential nature of the Self, which is pure enjoyment and beatitude – related to the *akash* or space element.

Temple complexes like Annamalaiyar reflect this understanding of the archetypal divine human. The temple is subdivided into five *prakarams* (courtyards), each embodying one of the five *koshas*. The pilgrim's progressive movement from the (outer) fifth courtyard to the (inner) first courtyard, where the Fire Lingam resides, reflects attention turned gradually inward from the physical world to the very core of the *jiva's* being, the *Atman* or Divine Self that is one with *Brahman*.

Most pilgrims enter the temple complex through the great eastern tower, called Rajagopuram, which rises 217 ft and was built in 1516. Its eleven registers are a masterpiece of elegant sculptures rising like a mountain, a place of residence for divine beings. Entering through this grand tower clearly lets visitors know they are entering holy ground. In the outermost fifth courtyard – related to the *annamaya kosha*, there are shrines that focus on more mundane concerns. The first shrine, to the left of the entrance to the fifth *prakaram*, celebrates Murugan, the patron of Tamil literature, language and culture, and protector of Tamil land. As the son of Siva and Parvati and the ideal of strength, courage, and wisdom in a young man, he is prayed to for assistance in finding a proper husband or wife.

Just behind this shrine is the Bangle *mantapam* (pillared hall), where women come to pray for the safe birth for their children. Every summer, Siva's consort

Ambal is adorned with bangles here on the final day of her 10-day Adipuram festival (between July 15 and August 15). The glass bangles offered to Ambal by the priests are then given to women devotees hoping for protection during their pregnancies.

Also in this outermost courtyard are two marriage halls, where couples are married at special times of the year. In these halls Siva and Parvati are portrayed as the ideal married couple and supporters of the *dharma* of the householder. A final shrine in the fifth courtyard, the Kalyanasundarar temple is used for celebrating the fall rice harvest. During the rites at this time the *Sivalingam* is adorned with rice and flowers demonstrating the pilgrim's gratitude for the divine gift of fertility. The shrine also houses an inner wall that features *naga* stones. These snake deity statues are common in Siva temples and are believed to grant petitioners fertility and protection from snakebite.

As pilgrims enter the fourth courtyard, symbolising the *pranamaya kosha* or subtle energy body (connected to the water element), they immediately see to their left the Brahma *tirtham* or bathing tank. The *tirtham* is host to special rites on the four days of the annual solar and lunar eclipses as well as an abundant fish population. Pilgrims can buy feed for the fish, and children enjoy tossing the pellets into the water and watching the fish swirl around them. Devotees also encounter the Bhairavar Temple, dedicated to the Lord of Time, and the fierce protector of the temple precincts from evil spirits. Pilgrims ring a bell in this shrine to ask forgiveness for their errors and thus purification from psychological states of guilt and regret. These states are believed responsible for blockages in the flow of *prana* through the body and thus the impaired function of breathing, digestion, and blood circulation.

It is notable that the fourth courtyard also houses the temple *gosala*, or cow shed, and the hundred-pillared horse *mantapam*, where horses were stabled in a past era. The hall was, until recently, the day shelter for Ruku, the late temple elephant, who blessed pilgrims as they

moved into the third *prakaram*. These animals are connected with *pranamaya kosha*, since it is the sheath that governs the autonomic nervous system and thus the instinctual part of human existence. These animals are all considered symbols of strength, vitality, and dedicated service.

Two other shrines in this *prakaram* are connected to the restoration of health, the amelioration of negative *karma*, and the enlistment of powerful demigods to overcome obstacles. The first is the Vidyadhareshwarar shrine, located on the west side of the Brahma *tirtham*. Vidyadharas ("possessors of knowledge") are benevolent spirits of the air, demigods who attend Siva. They are believed to possess great magical powers and are prayed to for assistance by pilgrims.

The second is the Naleshwarar Shrine, named after King Nala. Tradition has it that the king worshipped Saturn (Shani) to be freed from the Lord of Karma's inauspicious influences in his life. Siva then released the king from all of Saturn's negative effects. Pilgrims ask for Shani's assistance when facing heavy *karmic* burdens and ill health.

The pilgrim now passes through the *kili* or parakeet tower into the third courtyard. At this point the spiritual atmosphere becomes more highly charged, as the devotee is very close to the second and first *prakarams*, which house the main temple *murtis* and the Fire Lingam. The third courtyard symbolises the *manomaya kosha*, the mental sheath that takes in sensory stimuli and responds with conditioned desires, aversions, passions, ambitions, attachments, and mental chatter. This conditioned mind (*manas*) is in thrall to the world of objects and to entanglement with the drama of possessions, relationships, power struggles, and self-assertion. Related to the fire element, it is with *manas* that the *sadhana* necessary for liberation becomes a conscious striving.

It should be said that fire has other associations which are relevant to this inquiry. Agni, the god of Fire, is of primary importance in the Vedas. The Rig and Sama Veda *Samhitas* each begin

with the word Agni. Agni symbolises the Supreme Being itself, omnipresent and immediately perceptible in fire. In the Vedic vision, Agni is the messenger between the divine and human worlds, which is why its name is omnipresent in *homas* and *pujas*. It symbolises aspiration for liberation and the fire of *tapas*, which burns away ignorance and attachment in the all-consuming fire of Self-awareness.

In the third courtyard are important shrines which symbolise *sadhana* and *tapas*. Walking around the courtyard in a clockwise direction, the first shrine is the *Pannir* (Rosewater) *mantapam*, a four-pillared hall. During *Vasantha Utsavam*, the Spring Festival, a form of Siva and Parvati known as Lord Somaskanda is carried from his home shrine in a palanquin and installed at the hall. Then a celestial nymph descends from heaven to hover before Somaskanda. The rites reference the story of Kama, the God of Love, who arouses Siva from his thousand-year meditation and is turned into ash as punishment. Later Siva relents and brings him back to life. The story symbolises the dangers of romantic passion and attachment, which disturb the mind's equilibrium and turn it away from interior focus on the Self. Even though equilibrium is disturbed, disciplined effort and the grace of Arunachala can turn the mind inward and reawaken Self-awareness. In a similar vein romantic passion can become passion for the Divine, the *bhakti* that purifies the *manomaya kosha* and prepares the *jiva* for sustained *sadhana* and abidance in the Self.

Continuing around the courtyard, the pilgrim encounters a *lingam* platform that features two shrines to Dakshinamurti. This form of Siva is related to a Puranic story that begins with the four sons of Brahma renouncing the work of creating and sustaining the world so that they can pursue *moksha*. Moved by the single-mindedness of their quest, Siva appears as a youth sitting under a banyan tree and facing south. Though his eyes are open, he is silently absorbed in Self-awareness with his hand in the *chinmudra* pose, symbolising the unity of the individual self and the



Supreme Self. The four sons, drawn to sit around the youth, spontaneously realise the Self through his wordless presence. These two *murtis* are just the first of many shrines and *murtis* to this form of Siva that can be found within the 3rd and 2nd *prakarams*. This is a significant signal to pilgrims that both



★ **HOLY FLAME:**
The big cauldron, containing wick and ghee, which is lit on top of the Arunachala hill on Karthigai Deepam day.

• PHOTO:
C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

inner silence and the interiorisation of attention is what is now needed to realise the full potential of the Fire Lingam's *darshan*.

The next important shrine sits directly behind the Fire Lingam, and is dedicated to Yogeshwara, Siva's form as Lord of Yoga and the ideal monk, swami, and sadhu. Here he is known as Arunagiri Yogeshwara, the master yogi who lives on Arunachala and sits under a great banyan tree that is forbidden to approach. There is a small *murti* of the great yogi inside the shrine. The

shrine's placement just behind the Fire Lingam shrine is a reminder that *tapas*, detachment and withdrawal of the mind's attention from the outer world of objects is the necessary precursor to union with the Supreme Self.

A unique aspect of the Annamalaiyar Temple is that it has shrines to each of the four other elements (besides fire) in this third courtyard. Each of these shrines has a *lingam* in its interior and tableaux above the entrance referencing the central Puranic story regarding the *lingams* at the temples of Sri Kalahasthi (air), Kanchipuram (earth), Chidambaram (*akash* or space), and Thiruvanaikaval (water). There may be a subtle hint here that the Annamalaiyar Fire Temple offers a smaller scale version of the pilgrimage to the *Pancha Bhutas* for those who are unable to make the full pilgrimage to the other four temples.

As a *mukti sthala* (temple where final liberation can occur) it is appropriate that the other four elements are represented here, so that recalibration and purification of the five elements and *koshas* can take place during the pilgrim's movement into *darshan* in the inner sanctum.

We can now proceed to the second and first courtyards, where devotees enter gates that direct them to the Fire Lingam shrine as well as other major Siva-related *murtis*. What do worshippers experience at the Fire Lingam and other shrines around it, and how is what they experience related to the element fire and its related sheath, the *manamaya kosha*? And how do the *darshans* and meditations that take place in this central shrine resonate with Bhagavan's teachings on Self-realisation?

We can start with Bhagavan's own experience at the temple, which took place the day of his arrival in Tiruvannamalai on September 1, 1896. His biographers report that the first place he went was the Annamalaiyar Temple. Because of special cleanings that were happening on that date, the temple was nearly empty. The young Venkataraman moved easily through the five courtyards and entered the Fire Lingam shrine's interior, where he

experienced a complete merging with the Supreme Reality. It is said that from that moment forward, the mind of duality was extinguished in the young sage and he lived in uninterrupted Self-abidance. This highly significant event reveals the potential power of Annamalaiyar Temple for the pilgrims who go for *darshan* and meditation at the Fire Lingam sanctum.

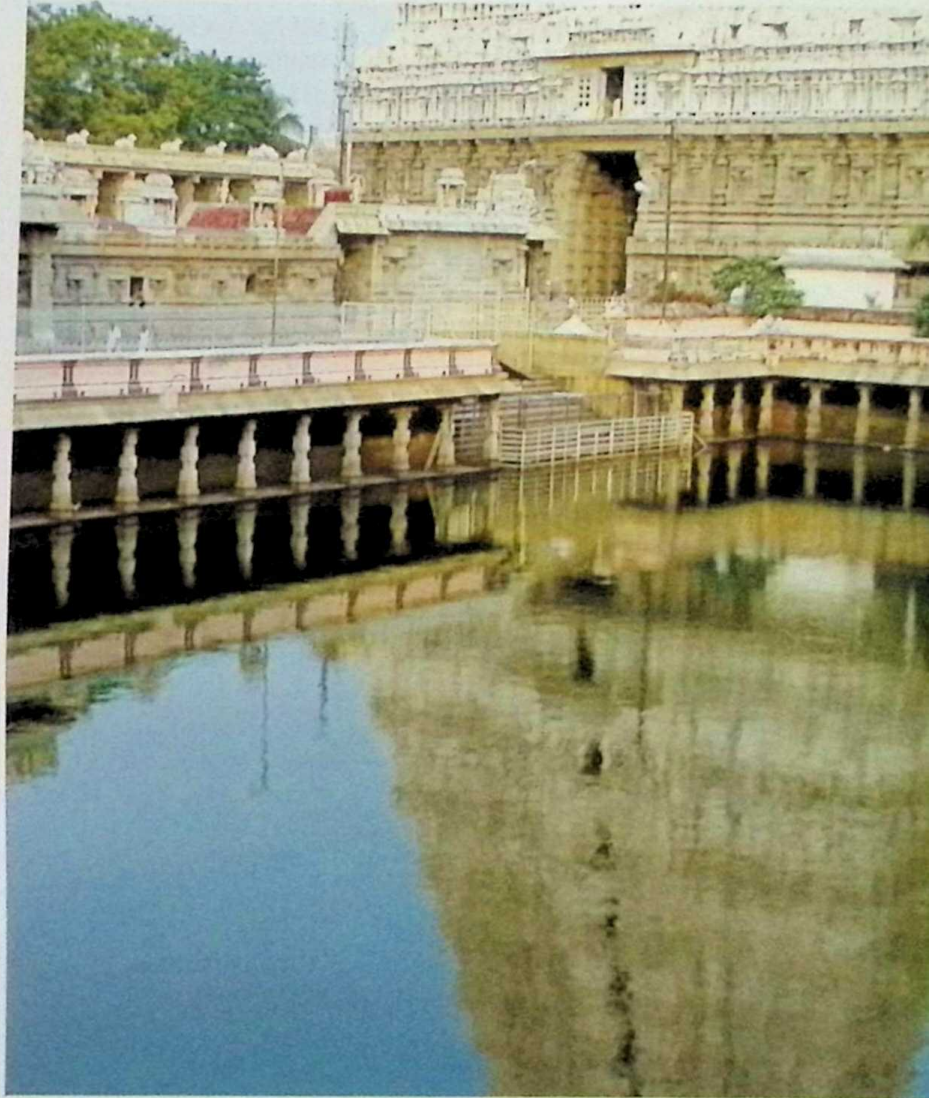
As pilgrims leave the direct *darshan* of the Fire Lingam, they are given *vibhuti* (ash), symbolising Siva's renunciation of the world, and the turning of attention toward the Divine Self. The next two shrines they encounter – which sit directly adjacent to the *lingam* sanctum – deepen and reinforce this silencing of the roaming *manomaya kosha*, if the pilgrim remains in the introversion of awareness initiated there. The first is the shrine to the silent sage, Dakshinamurti. Darshan here deepens inner tranquillity and Self-awareness. No words or thoughts are necessary, and the devotee becomes one of Brahma's four sons, brought to stillness and Self-abidance by this south-facing form of Siva.

The pilgrim next arrives for *darshan* and perhaps meditation at a small alcove just behind the Fire Lingam, the Lingodbhava shrine. The symbolism of the Lingodbhava reinforces the spiritual process instantiated and engendered in the Annamalaiyar Temple. The boar form of Vishnu (Varaha Avatara), representing the *manomaya kosha* with its orientation to sensory impressions and bodily identification, performs *pranams* (obeisance) to the feet of Siva, the Self, at the bottom of the pillar of fire. Attention is now fully on the Supreme Reality and no longer on the sensory-based world of objects and forms. The swan/*hamsa* form of Brahma, representing the intellect sheath or *vijnanamaya kosha*, sits at the upper edge of the pillar, singly attentive to the Self. Both are now subsumed into the Supreme Reality. The pillar of fire itself, with Siva's image in its midst, is the fully Self-realised *jnani*, the divine human, fully awake in the light of Self-knowledge.

Since Bhagavan is such a *jnani*, visitors to Sri Ramanasramam can

experience this same inner stillness when they visit his *samadhi* shrine or the Old Hall. And since Arunachala itself is the Maha Fire Lingam, devotees can bathe in this stillness when they perform *pradakshina* or meditate in Virupaksha Cave or Skandhashram.

The last temple shrine that pilgrims



visit is entered as they exit the second courtyard. It is the shrine honouring Siva's consort/wife, whose Tamil name is Unnamalaiyar Ambal. The worship here offers thanks for the beauty and sustenance of the phenomenal world, now perceived as the raiment of the Supreme Reality. Just as the symbolism of the Fire Lingam and Lingodbhava references the vertical union of devotees with *Nirguna Brahman*, Reality beyond qualities, the symbolism of the Ambal *murtis*, with their birds, flowers, and other natural forms, references

★ **MESMERISING:**
The Siva Ganga Theertham, a sacred tank, in the Arunachaleswarar temple complex.

– PHOTO: © PHILLIP LUCAS.

the devotees' horizontal union with *Saguna Brahman*, the Supreme Reality in its modes of manifestation. This is poetically expressed in the image of *Ardhanareeshvara*, Siva as half male and half female.

The *Arunachala Puranas* relate the story of *Parvati's* penance for a playful indiscretion that threatened the created universe. The final phase of her *tapas* is coming to *Arunachala*, defeating a demon army that was terrorising *sadhus* and pilgrims, and walking around the holy mountain. Siva is so pleased with her penance that he appears and grants her request to be eternally unified with his cosmic body, so that she can never be separated from him again. It is no doubt significant that the main *darshan* for the *Ardhanareeshvara murti* occurs at the moment the flame is lit at the top of the mountain at the climax of the *Deepam* festival.

Just before the full moon rises, she is brought out to the sixteen-pillared

Kaatchi mantapam, which faces the entrance to the second courtyard. From there she can witness the annual commemoration of Siva's fiery appearance as the fire mountain, *Arunachala*. The symbolism is now complete. For those pilgrims who are mature, the mind can merge with the great stillness that is the Self, the dualities of the phenomenal world are both celebrated and transcended, and the *mukti sthalam* of *Annamalaiyar* has fulfilled its purpose.

Courtesy:

Mountain Path, Volume 56, No. 1,
January-March 2019, published by
Sri Ramanasramam.

Phillip Lucas is a professor of
Religious Studies at Stetson University in
Florida, U.S.A. He is a documentary
film-maker, whose latest is titled
The Shiva Temple of Tiruvannamalai:
Pilgrimage of Liberation.

• THE THREE
GOPURAMS: The
rajagopuram
and two other
gopuras of the
Arunachaleswara
temple in the
backdrop of the
sacred hill.

- PHOTOS:
S.R. RAGHUNATHAN







Temple murals: a slice of history

*A look at murals in the
Tiruvannamalai temple that belong
to different styles*

▪ K. T. GANDHIRAJAN ▪



Painting traditions in Tamil Nadu hark back to pre-historic times. Proper canonical paintings have been found since the 7th century AD, as well as during the Pallava and the Pandya times. The Tiruvannamalai temple received various grants during the Chola period. After the rule of the Cholas, political instability affected art activities.

Later, during the Vijayanagara period, the 100-pillared and the 1,000-pillared *mantapa* and *rajagopura* were built in this temple complex. By this time, most of the structures were painted with religious and social themes with decorative patterns. However, in most of the locations, these mural paintings were damaged due to natural factors and human vandalism.

Mural paintings at Tiruvannamalai are found in five locations: the ceiling of the second *prakara* corridor; in the Yanai Kattum Mantapa; thirdly in the Rajagopura; the Kalyana Mantapa and finally at the Eluthu Mantapa. Paintings in the fourth site, Eluthumantapa, are not in a good condition for study. All these paintings belong to different periods and styles.

Location 1

Second *prakara*, corridor

This ceilings of this *prakara* are painted with several Saivaite and

Vaishnavite stories. The rest of the *prakara* areas are decorated with geometrical and floral designs.

Most of the paintings in the corridor are damaged. The figures of gods and goddesses are slim and well-proportioned, while other figures are bulky and sometimes without proportion. Human figures are in a more conventional form, while animals and birds are painted in somewhat realistic forms.

Location 2

Yanai Kattum Mantapa

On the ceiling of this *mantapa* are painted Siva's wedding and Amirthamanthana narratives. Siva and Parvati are standing in the middle panel. To the right of Parvati, Vishnu and Lakshmi stand with other female participants. To the left of Siva, stand the *devas*. Between Siva and the *devas* is Brahma, performing *yaga* (sacrificial fire) on the platform. These three groups are painted in three different frames.

In the *Amirthamanthana* narratives, the themes are painted in rows, which run left to right or right to left. Figures in the crowd composition are drawn carefully.

Location 3

Rajagopura

The elephant-hunting scene is a major subject in the *mantapa* ceiling

★ **POORLY MAINTAINED MURALS:**

(From top) The badly damaged murals in Yanai Kattum Mantapa in the Arunachaleswarar temple; and the three panels below are from the Kalyana Mantapa, portraying a king with his wives; Gundodharan swallowing fish; and Krishna as Venugopala.

~ PHOTOS: K.T. GANDHIRAJAN

in rectangular frame. This theme is framed by multiple borders with designs. Just above the panel, a series of dancers, musicians and royal visitors are portrayed. It seems that they are watching the cultural programmes and witnessing the elephant-hunting.

In the main panel, the elephant is placed in the central portion. On both sides of it, a hunter and a woman are portrayed. The elephant and the two hunters are painted more dynamically, the two female figures are simply watching the scenes. These designs are in different character. This panel is framed by multiple borders with geometrical and conventional motifs. Each border has unique pattern of design, which is painted in red, yellow and white, completed by a black outline.

Location 4

Kalyana Mantapa

This *mantapa* is located in the second *prakara*. The ceiling and walls are painted with religious stories, secular subjects, as also decorative patterns. These paintings could have done during Maratha period, but it was repainted several times during the various renovations. Red, black, white, green, yellow and blue colours are used. Blue seems more dominant colour among others.

Location 5

Eluthu Mantapa

The paintings in this *mantapa* are more damaged than in the others. They cannot therefore be studied in detail.

K. T. Gandhirajan is an art historian who has discovered many rock art sites.





Temple maintenance: endowments and measures

*Inscriptions reveal that the
Tiruvannamalai temple was well
cared for by rulers of various
dynasties over centuries*

▪ DR. T. SATYAMURTHY ▪

T

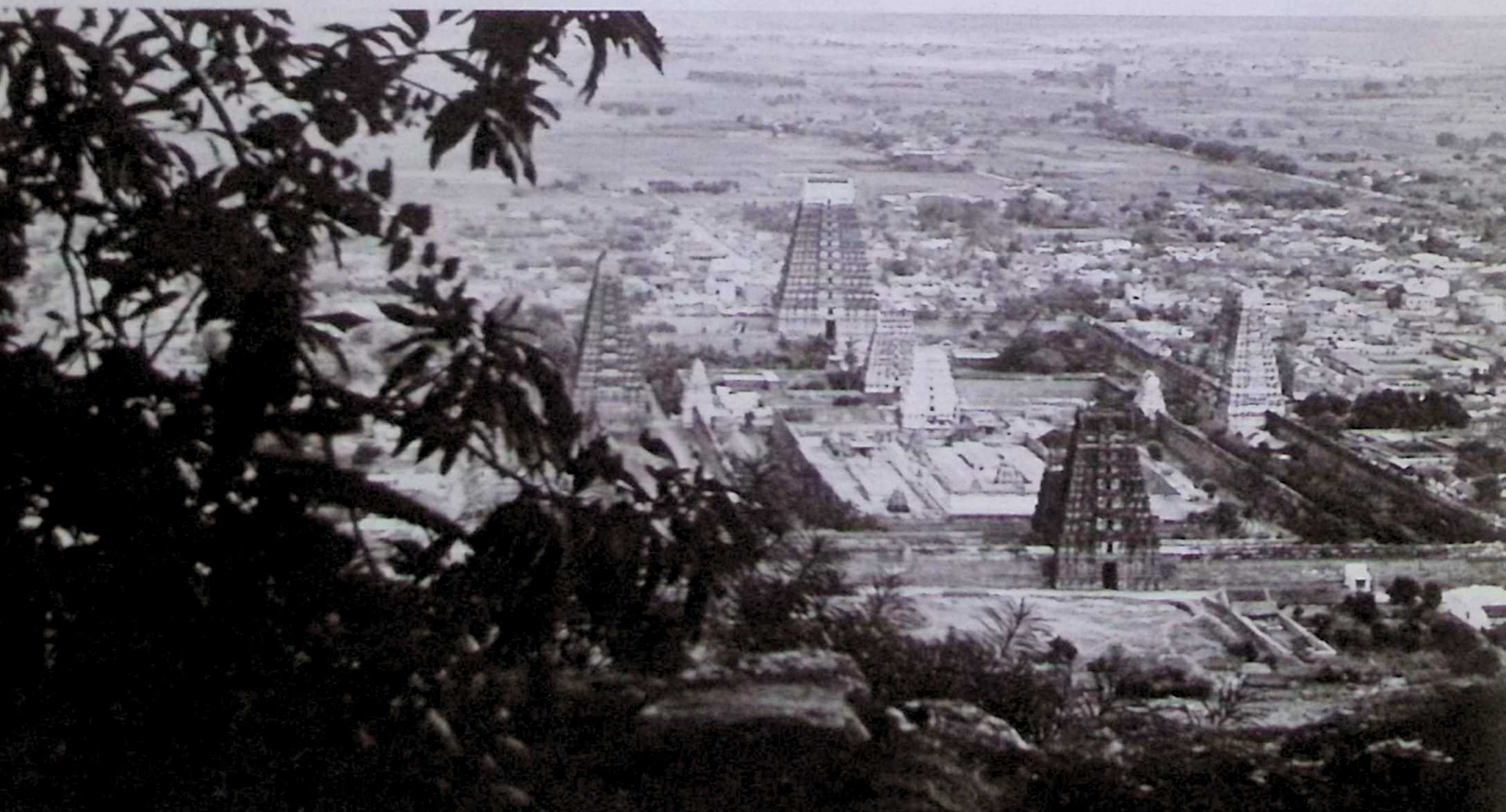
he Arunachaleswarar temple in Tiruvannamalai has more than 500 inscriptions of various periods engraved on the temple walls and other edifices. The earliest among them are datable to the early Chola period. Dynasties like the Pandyas, the Kongu-Cholas, the Telugu-Cholas and Sambuvarayars have contributed to the maintenance of the temple and for daily and occasional rituals. It is interesting that not only the rulers had their submission to the deity through contributions, but the normal citizen could also contribute and

engrave their endowments to the lord in the lithic records.

The synonym for Arunachala is Aruna and Achala (red-brownish hill) and the main deity is the lord of this hill. Hence, the temple as per tradition, is deemed inclusive of the entire hillock nearby.

Circumambulation of the hill was the main religious observance for all devotees. This practice of considering the hill itself as the principal deity is found to be documented during Pallava period. The child-prodigy Saiva Seer Thirugnanasambandar (7CE) in his songs on Arunachalesvara, tells us that the Arunachala mountain is the

• An aerial view of the Arunachaleswarar temple complex. G. G. Welling took this picture in 1946. - PHOTO: SRI RAMANASRAMAM



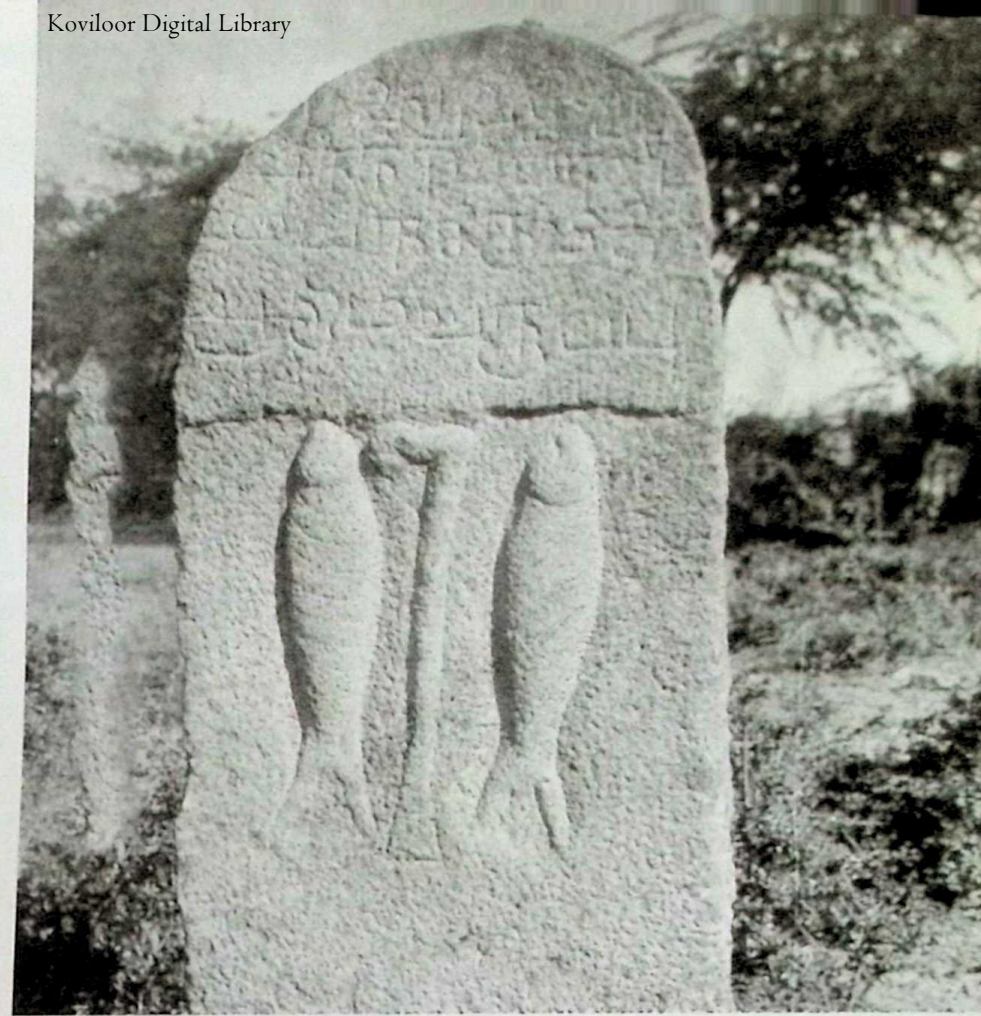
embodiment of Lord Siva and one can attain the grace of Siva by revering the ecosystem of the mountain. He includes the wild and domesticated animals that dwell in the mountain and its surroundings.

In the later period, the pathway (14 km) used for the circumambulation of the hill, was converted into a regular road for the convenience of the devotees. Vikrama Pandya of 13th century CE renovated the pathway and converted it into a *pradakshinapatha* around the mountain. The road was divided into many sub-parts and each sub-division was known as 'Vahuppu'. The sub-division was made for the proper maintenance of the pathway through a local head.

Utmost care must have been taken to see that the inner sanctum was also well preserved by adhering to the prescriptions in the Shilpa-text (*agama* manual). In fact, many rituals prescribed in ancient Indian texts are oriented towards the preservation of the main deities and inner circuits of the temple. Once the temple is consecrated, annual preservation of the main image and the inner circuit is made mandatory by a ritual known as *Samvatasara Abhishekam* (annual maintenance). This is more applicable in Saivaite temples, where the main idol is constantly worshipped with the anointment of different pastes or liquids.

During this occasion, mostly coinciding with the day of consecration every year, the main image made of stone is covered with a specially-prepared paste. This semi-solid herbal paste will mainly comprise rice flour mixed with curd made to ferment for 12 hours, which is then applied over the surface of the idol and allowed to dry for at least 10 hours. As the herbal paste dries, accretions on the idol like oil and dust would stick to the paste, and the idol would thus be cleaned. Some expiatory ceremonies are performed as per agamic prescriptions.

In Saivaite shrines where the main *linga* is worshipped by offering water, milk, fruits, honey, sandal paste and many other organic ingredients, several measures are prescribed as part of



rituals to keep the inner sanctum clean. Every day, the very first offering to Siva is *Panchagavya* (made from "five products"), an indigenous herbal germicide. The five products of the cow (milk, curd, ghee, dung and urine) are mixed in a particular proportion and offered as the very first *Abhisheka* (bath) for Siva.

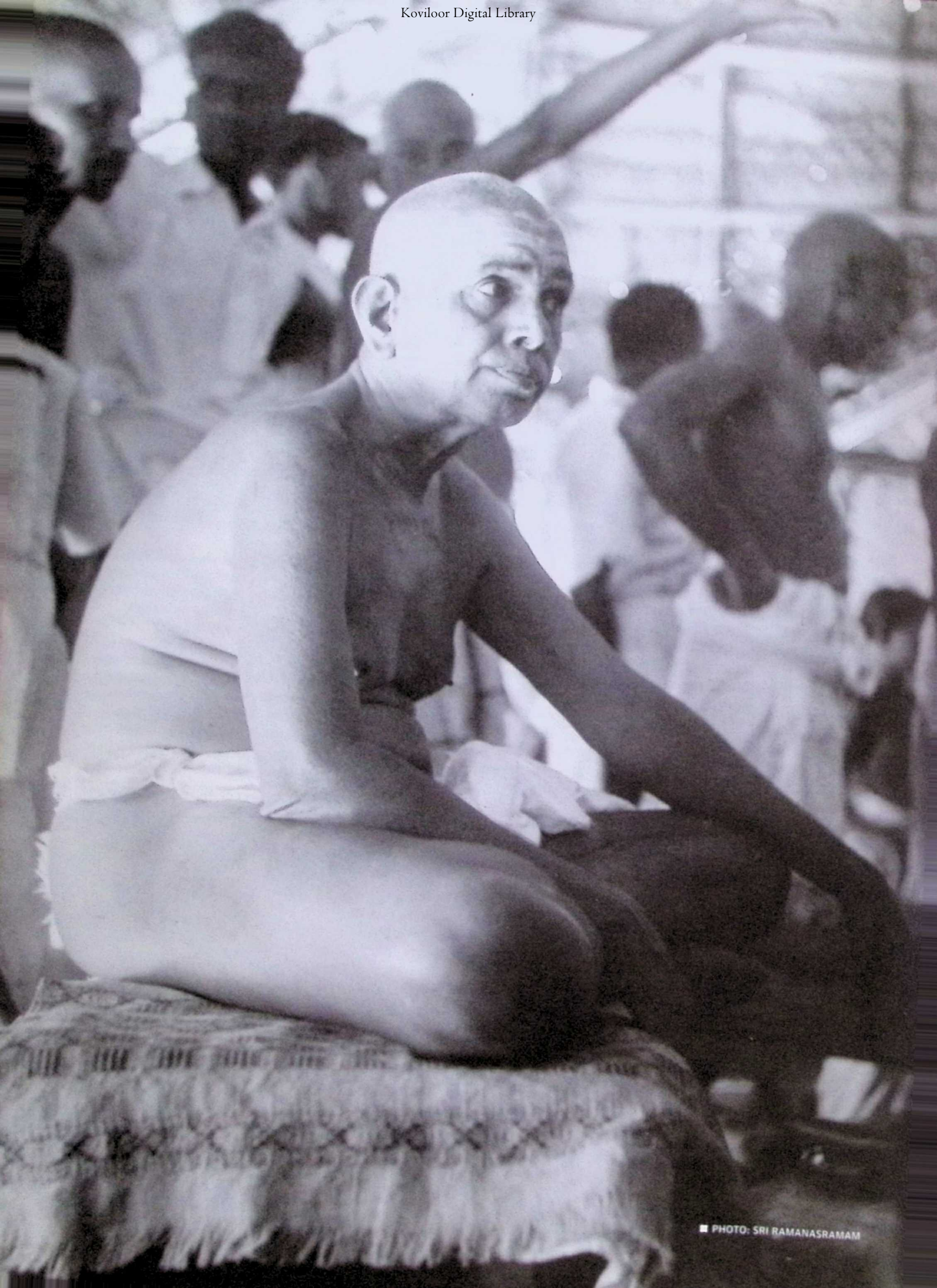
There are many lithic records to show that rulers issued many endowments to support this, by maintaining *gosalas* (cow dwellings) that supply the ingredients to the temples.

In an inscription in the Arunachaleswarar temple that can be dated to the 12th century CE, supply of *Panchagavya* to the main shrine was arranged by a servant of the king through an endowment created by him on his own savings for the maintenance of the cows, and remunerations for the *Edayars* (cowherds). The proportions of the five products of the cow (urine, dung, milk, curd and ghee) are stated as 2:1:4:4:4. This product becomes a germicide because of its therapeutic effects. This ritual is continued to this day in this temple, and the inner sanctum is well-maintained.

Dr. T. Satyamurthy was Superintending Archaeologist, ASI, Chennai Circles. He was also Director, Kerala State Department of Archaeology.

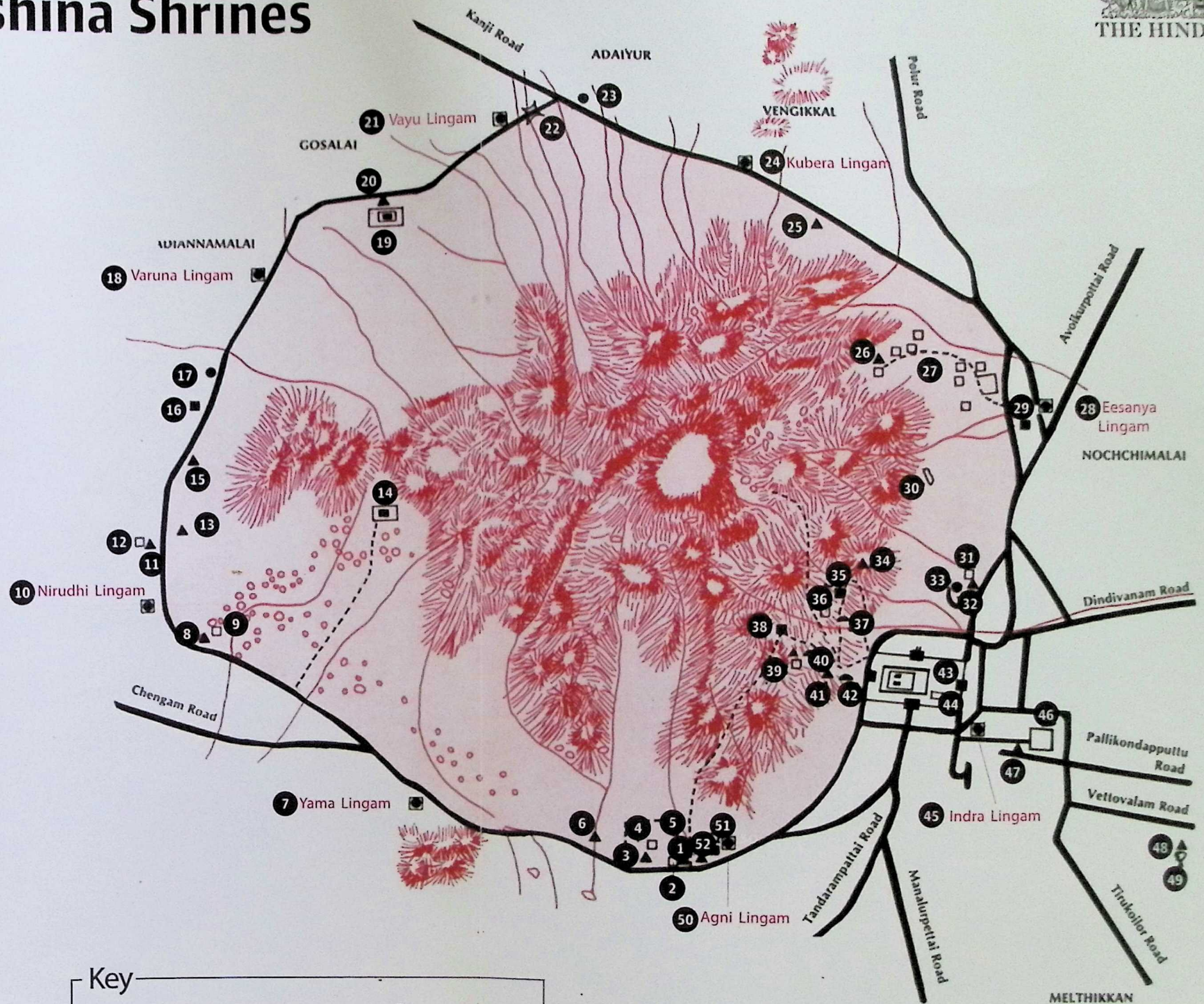
• Vikrama Pandya of the 13th century CE renovated the pathway around the hill and converted it into a *pradakshinapatha*. This lithic signboard of the same period, reading "Vikrama Pandyan Street", was found in Tiruvannamalai.

- PHOTO:
THE HINDU ARCHIVES



Giri Pradakshina Shrines

1. Sri Ramanasramam
2. Pali Theertham
3. Ganesha Temple
4. Agasthiya Theertham
5. Palakothu
6. Draupadi Temple
7. **Yama Lingam** (Southern direction)
8. Ganesha Shrine
9. Sona Theertham
10. **Nirughi Lingam** (South-West direction)
11. Unnamulai Amman Shrine
12. Unnamulai Theertham
13. Hanuman Shrine
14. Siddhasramam or Kattu Siva
15. Vedapari Mandapam (Echo Temple)
16. Gautama Ashram
17. Suriya Lingam
18. **Varuna Lingam** (Western direction)
19. Adi Annamalai Temple
20. Manikkavachakar Temple
21. **Vayu Lingam** (North-West direction)
22. Bhagavan's Bridge
23. Chandra Lingam
24. **Kubera Lingam** (North direction)
25. Panchamukha Shrine
26. Pachaiamman Shrine
27. Nine Tanks leading to the Shrine
28. **Eesanya Lingam** (North-East direction)
29. Eesanya Mutt
30. Tortoise Rock
31. Kadga Theertham
32. Durgaiamman Temple
33. Sunai Lingam
34. Pavazhakkunru Temple (Coral Hill)
35. Jadaswami Ashram
36. Mulaipal Theertham
37. Mango Tree Cave
38. Skandasramam
39. Pada Theertham and Temple
40. Virupaksha Cave
41. Guhai Namasivaya Temple
42. Alamarathu Cave (Banyan Tree Cave)
43. Arunachaleswara Temple
44. Siva Ganga Tank
45. **Indra Lingam** (Eastern direction)
46. Ayyamkulam Tank
47. Arunagirinathar Temple
48. Gurumurtam
49. Mango Grove
50. **Agni Lingam** (South-East direction)
51. Seshadri Ashram
52. Dakshinamurti Shrine

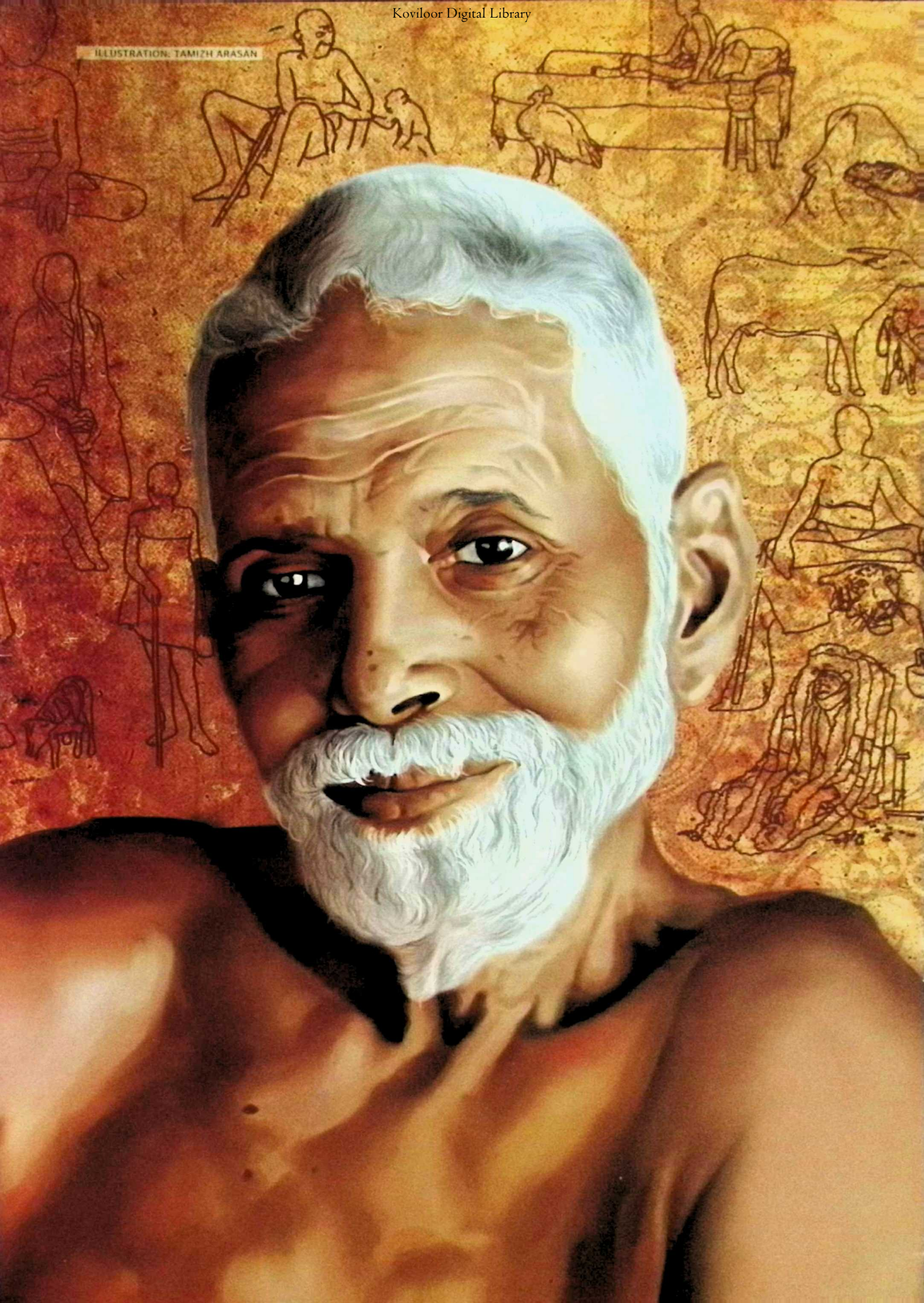


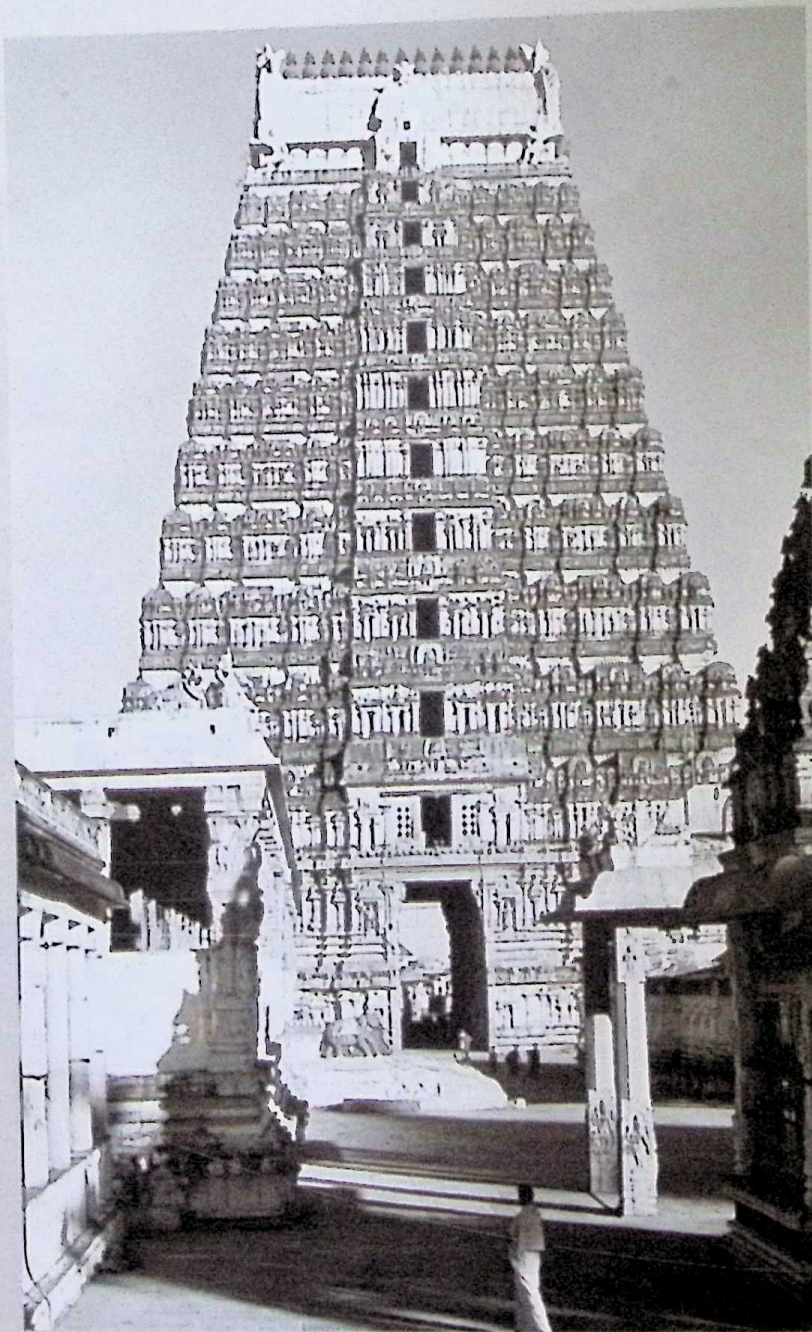
Key

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| ▲ Temple | ◐ Cave |
| ■ Ashram | --- Mountain path |
| ○ Tank (Tirtham) | — Road |
| ★ One of the Eight Directions | ☁ Forest |
| ● Lingam | ~ Monsoon stream |

Bhagavan: "To go round this hill is good. In the word '*pradakshina*', the letter '*pra*' stands for removal of all kinds of sins; '*da*' stands for fulfilling the desires; '*kshi*' for freedom from future births; and '*na*' for giving deliverance through '*jnana*'."

ILLUSTRATION: TAMILH ARASAN





Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi

Tiruvannamalai is synonymous with Sri Ramana Maharshi. With followers from world over, the Maharshi was a guiding beacon for all who looked up to him for spiritual solace. He was a seer of many facets, who bestowed a

deep affection on all things living. His love for the Arunachala hill is well-documented.

This volume delves deep into the life, teachings and times of Sri Ramana Maharshi, and looks at the legacy he left behind.

₹399



www.thehindu.com/publications

